EXPERIENCES OF TEXAS PUBLIC SCHOOL COMMUNICATION DIRECTORS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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by

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August, 2017

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DEDICATION

Sir Isaac Newton said, “If I have seen further, it has been by standing on the shoulders of giants.” With a complete understanding of this sentiment, I dedicate my dissertation to my amazing family whose shoulders are broad, whose love is unconditional, and whose grace is never-ending. *We did it Daddy.……*

ABSTRACT

Lopez, Sonja A., *Experiences of Texas public school communication directors in the 21st Century: A phenomenological study*. Doctor of Education (Educational Leadership), August, 2017, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

Communication directors have become part of public school districts' administrative framework in the 21st century. Maintaining a social media presence and satisfying stakeholders' expectations for current, up-to-date, and accurate information have increased the need for superintendents to employ a public relations professional. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the various experiences of communication directors in public schools. Grunig's (1992) excellence theory served as the conceptual framework for the study. By employing a purposive sampling strategy, six current Texas public school communication directors were selected for face-to-face interviews and completed a demographic questionnaire. The five themes of Preparation, Responsibilities, Expectations, Challenges, and Recommendations emerged through constant comparative analysis of the data. Multiple rounds of descriptive and in vivo coding revealed numerous subthemes within each theme. The findings of the study highlighted the importance of developing relationships in the field of public school communications. Engaging in mentorships, networking, and building school and community partnerships were viewed as vital to success in the position. The ability to write well and convey the district's and superintendent's message was also acknowledged. Challenges of managing social media, crisis situations, and public opinion were common to all participants. By better understanding the experiences of public school communication directors, districts can provide appropriate support so the position is successful in meeting districts' goals.

KEY WORDS: communication, public relations, public schools, social media

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No one travels the journey of a doctoral program alone, and I had many helpmates along the way. Their support and encouragement cannot be understated or minimized. Without the following people, my goals would not have been realized.

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Julie Combs, thank you for your brilliance, your patience, and your thoughtful insight into helping me write the dissertation I wanted to write. From the beginning, you understood the importance of writing something that was true to my profession and something I could publish with pride.

To my co-chairs, Dr. Rebecca Bustamante and Dr. Pamela Gray, thank you for your input and guidance throughout this process. My study is stronger because of the time you attributed to it.

To the Educational Leadership faculty at Sam Houston State University, thank you for the time you took to build personal relationships with each member of my cohort. You are true champions of your students and your unselfish gift of your time and expertise was so appreciated. The background and foundational knowledge I gained through the doctoral coursework was invaluable to the completion of my dissertation. I was so awesomely prepared to conduct the research and write once I completed your courses. Thank you, Dr. Sue Horne, Dr. Julie Combs, Dr. Cynthia Martinez-Garcia, Dr. Susanna Skidmore, Dr. Rebecca Bustamante, Dr. John Slate, Dr. George Moore, and Dr. Stacey Edmonson.

To personal friend, Dr. Carolyn Fiaschetti, your encouragement to follow in your footsteps and enter into SHSU's doctoral program cannot be underestimated. It is because of your relentless prodding and encouragement that I even took the first step.

You have the heart of a servant and the people around you are better because of knowing you.

To my Montgomery ISD family, big BEAR hugs to each and every one of you who provided support, encouragement, and a much needed laugh. I couldn't work with a more giving group of people who know how to share their gifts so that others succeed. I have much to pay forward.

Finally, to Cohort 32, thank you for sharing every Thursday night with me for over two years. This experience has been all the richer because of the time I spent with you. I wish only God's best for each and every one of you in your professional and personal lives.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background of Study

As of August 2015, the state of Texas consisted of 1,266 public school districts that are served by 20 regional educational service centers providing leadership, training, and technical assistance to districts and serving as liaisons to the Texas Education Agency (Texas Education Agency, 2015). According to the Public Education Information Management System's 2013-2014 staffing data, Texas employs 402 staff members among public schools whose primary role is coded under communications (Texas Education Agency, 2015). The communication director's position in Texas public school districts typically is a district-level position that reports directly to the superintendent. Communication directors are part of the superintendent's cabinet and not generally considered supervisory, but rather staff positions that support the various functions and roles occupied by a school district (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Moore, Bagin, & Gallagher, 2016). As the demands of public relations and communication increase among all stakeholders in public schools, communication departments are becoming an integral part of public school management in the 21st century.

In relation to businesses and organizations in the public and private sector, occupations in public relations had a predicted growth rate of 12% through 2012 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014). The immediacy and accessibility of information for all publics continued to keep communication professionals relevant in the various types of businesses and communities. The U.S. News and World Report (2014)

ranked public relations as 85th in the Top 100 Jobs List in America. The importance and relevancy of the public relations professional has not escaped public education.

Communication departments have become part of the administrative framework of today's public schools. As the demands of school leaders became increasingly demanding in fostering internal and external public relationships, educating publics about policy and practice, and maintaining a presence through various communication channels, superintendents have encumbered the services of specialists in the field of communications (Moore et al., 2016). The expectation of school leaders to facilitate collaborative relationships in developing strategic plans for school improvement and student success prompted school leaders to employ personnel who specialize in analyzing local social and political agendas (Kowalski, 2011). Furthermore, with the advancement of social media, public school independent school districts (ISDs) are finding themselves with unique opportunities to manage their images through a variety of contexts, something which has been long available to the business world. To maximize the value of public relations, communication departments must identify strategic publics and build long-term relationships with them through systematical communication programs (Grunig, 1992). How are school districts maximizing the value of their communication departments and utilizing these entities to promote their message to stakeholders? Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, and Genest (2001) identified reputation management as one of the most common roles for public relations departments. By recognizing the changing dynamics of public relations, public school districts are taking advantage of the changes in today's socially communicative environment by building on the foundation of

public relations departments to include communication skills, technological advances, and business management practices (Hutton, 1999).

Significance of the Study

As the landscape of the public relation's world changes with the onset of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, public school districts are in uncharted positions with powerful branding and messaging opportunities to be taken advantage of with the employment of communication directors. Wide-spread internet access for most stakeholders allows for quick access to school websites, social media sites, and up-to-date messaging connecting stakeholders to campus and district information. Therefore, there was a need to explore the experiences of public school communication directors. The significance of my study was four-fold.

First, due to the limited amount of research available about the role of communication directors in public school districts, results from my study might be used to contribute valuable information to the field of education about the roles and challenges of a public school district communication director. Second, by interpreting and analyzing interviews with current public district communication directors, my hope is to bring value to the position by revealing challenges faced in the various roles and improve implementation of practices. Third, the results of the study might help to create, improve, and enact new policies surrounding the world of public school communication. Finally, results from my study will provide decision makers and hiring personnel with insight into the needs for induction and support of these key school personnel.

Purpose of the Study

Though communication departments are not a new concept in the mainstream business world, these divisions are relatively recent in today's public schools' organizational charts as the superintendency has become more complex and requires the services of specialists to meet superintendents' leadership responsibilities (Moore et al., 2016). More information is needed from public school communication specialists to understand and improve the profession. The purpose of the study was to explore the various experiences of communication directors in public schools.

Research Question

This qualitative study consisted of one overarching research question: What are the experiences of communication directors in Texas public school districts in the 21st century?

Statement of the Problem

Communication departments are still a relatively new division in public school districts. In 2015, of the 1,266 school districts in the state of Texas, approximately 300 had a dedicated employee as the communication director (Texas Education Agency, 2015). However, limited up-to-date resources are unavailable to guide these public relations professionals in the arena of public education. If public school districts are to utilize these departments and positions effectively, the experiences, roles, expectations, and challenges of the communication director position must be understood by superintendents, Boards of Trustees, and stakeholders.

With the origination of social media sites like Facebook in 2004, Twitter in 2006, and Instagram in 2010, the information pipeline has changed dramatically for public

school districts. In the technological age of minute-to-minute, up-to-date messaging, school districts are faced with maximizing the potential and opportunities of a public relations program. It is imperative that districts understand the experiences and challenges faced by communication directors in order to reap the benefits of employing someone dedicated to promoting and publicizing district initiatives and information.

Most superintendents have followed a career path of campus teacher to campus administrator and then to district official (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012; Kim & Brunner, 2009; Muñoz, Pankake, Simonsson, & Mills, 2012; Wesson & Marshall, 2012/2013). Because of the position's infancy of the public school communication director position, most superintendents and district officials have not been school communication directors. Skills such as effective district messaging, crisis management, and publication may have not been developed along the path toward public school administration. A rich background in media relations, branding, social media utilization, and crisis-management implementation might not be evident (Moore et al., 2016). Therefore, it is imperative for superintendents and district administrators to understand the experiences of communication directors and how to best utilize their services.

Conceptual Framework

Grunig's (1992) excellence theory served as a conceptual framework for this study. In 1982, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABS) formed the IABC Research Foundation to advance research initiatives in the field of public relations. A 15-year study of literature incorporated the best practices in communication management and produced a general theory of public relations. The theory was tested with public relations professionals, CEOs, and employees in 327 various organizations

including corporations, nonprofits, and governmental agencies in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. After a quantitative analysis of data, qualitative interviews were held with public relations professionals in 25 organizations who possessed the highest and lowest scores on Grunig's scale of excellence. The excellence theory sought to provide a framework for how public relations assisted the goal attainment of an organization.

To explain the value of public relations to organizations and their publics, excellence theory asserted managerial decisions must be based on social responsibility and quality relationships with stakeholders (Grunig, 1992). This stakeholder theory required organizations to consider the organization's goals and stakeholder's goals as equally important when planning and executing decisions. In addition, symmetrical communication that valued both the organization's and the public's interests was more effectual. Trusting relationships were also valued for organizational effectiveness. Grunig's (1992) research noted symmetrical communication helped to improve morale due to "employees were more likely to enhance rather than constrain the organization's ability to achieve its goals" (p. 26).

In addition, Grunig's (1992) research identified 12 characteristics of excellent organizations, which included "human resources, organic structure, intrapreneurship, symmetrical communication systems, leadership, culture, strategic planning, social responsibility, support for women and minorities, quality-mindedness, effective operational systems, and a collaborative social culture" (Grunig, 1992, pp. 16-17). From these 12 characteristics of effective organizations and the theoretical premise about the value of public relations, Grunig's excellence theory derived the following five principles

of how public relations roles and functions should be organized and executed to realize public relations' full potential to an organization (Grunig, 1992):

- Strategic management – Strategically developed programs to communicate with stakeholders and publics, both internally and externally, public relations built relationships that assisted in managing conflict and achieving tasks. Also, the positioning of the public relations professional within upper-level management's organizational structure provided the most effective access to key decision makers and a direct line of communication to senior management.
- Individual public relations departments – Public relations was a singular department within an organization whose functions and roles coordinated with other departments. If public relations were an additional function of other departments, such as marketing, sales, or human resources, the predominant interests of these departments superseded the organization's goals. Excellent public relation departments integrated the needs and visions of all organizational departments and carried out communication through a variety of programs. Additionally, public relation departments headed by a manager who understood and directed various programs was necessary for excellence. Technical functions were a necessity for daily tasks but not at the expense of direction and leadership of organizational objectives.
- Symmetrical internal communication – Excellent public relations models allowed for a decentralized structure of authority encouraging autonomy in the expression of ideas and a participatory nature of all stakeholders. Improved morale and job

satisfaction resulted in two-way dialogic communication practice. Recognition of social responsibility was also evident in excellent communication plans.

- Diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender – Purposeful acknowledgement of diversity in all roles was another principle of the excellence theory of public relations. Variety in races and ethnicities, as well as proportional representation of men and women in managerial and technician roles, strengthened an organization.
- Excellence embodied in all facets of the organization – An active, participatory culture that possessed an affinity for excellence in all areas of an organization's reach was another principle in Grunig's theory. Ethical and moral considerations, along with high standards, emanated in the practices of the public relations functions and contributed to acquisition of organizational goals.

Grunig's excellence theory in public relations and communication management included these five principles in a productive public relations model that benefited an organization.

Definitions of Terms

In this study, various terms identifiable with the world of communication and public relations were utilized. Definitions of key terms are provided for comprehension and increased understanding.

Professional ethics. In this study, professional ethics was defined as "the consensus of experts on the human responsibilities and obligations for practitioners in a given profession" (Kowalski, 2011, p. 58).

Public opinion. In this study, public opinion was defined as "a collection of individual viewpoints held more or less in common by members of a group regarding some person, condition, or proposal" (Moore et al., 2016, p. 11).

Public relations. In this study, public relations was defined as "the management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6).

School public relations. In this study, school public relations was defined as "a planned, systematic management function designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization" (National School Public Relations Association, 2002, p. 1). School public relations rely on "a comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization" (NSPRA, 2002, p. 1). In addition, school public relations was defined as:

> An evolving social science and leadership process utilizing multimedia approaches designed to build goodwill, enhance the public's attitude toward the value of education, augment interaction and two-way symmetrical communication between schools and their ecosystems, provide vital and useful information to the public and employees, and play an integral role in planning and decision-making functions. (Kowalski, 2011, p. 14)

School public relations professional. In this study, school public relations professional was defined as "a skilled person who performs essential communication functions to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization" (Moore et al., 2016, p. 59).

Social media. In this study, social media was defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan & Heinlein, 2010, p. 61).

Social media strategy. In this study, social media strategy was defined as "a goal-directed planning process for creating user generated content, driven by a group of Internet applications, to create a unique and valuable competitive position" (Effing & Spil, 2016, p.2).

Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA). In this study, Texas school public relations association was defined as "a nonprofit, professional organization chartered in 1964 dedicated to promoting public schools through effective communications" (TSPRA, 2019, para. 1). Currently, TSPRA's membership includes 900 professionals from a variety of school administrative positions (TSPRA, 2016).

Delimitations

This study only encompassed the experiences of the public school communications professional. Although other administrators might perform these duties, only those with the formal positon were asked to participate. Delimitations in the study included the six participants currently serving in the role of communication director in Texas public school districts. Further, the sample consisted of members from the Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) representation of Region 4 and Region 6 in Texas. Participants in the study were housed in the district's central administrative offices and were part of the superintendent's cabinet.

Limitations

Qualitative research is interpretative research and subjective analysis of the data should be noted by the researcher (Creswell, 2014). Due to my emic perspective and closeness to the subject matter, the possibility of researcher bias in the analysis of the data may be a limitation to the study. In addition, the small sample size might not provide saturation of all phenomena experienced and limit the applicability of findings across all settings. The size of the school district could be a limitation due to the number of personnel in the participant's communication department. Also, the job responsibilities and available resources to each participant could be affected by the school district's size. Finally, the limited amount of time allotted for each interview might prohibit detailed information to be gleaned with each question. This single interview procedure should be considered a limitation for generalization of findings across public school districts. Strategies to address these limitations are detailed in Chapter III.

Assumptions

Multiple assumptions are inherent in my study. First, I assumed all participants voluntarily participated based on a clear understanding of the purpose of the study. Next, I assumed that my participants provided honest and insightful answers to the interview questions. In addition, I assumed the demographic data are correct. Finally, I assumed the data were transcribed and interpreted accurately as to allow themes to emerge.

Organization of Study

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of public school communication directors. Five chapters are included in the dissertation. Chapter I is comprised of the background of the study, the statement of the

problem, the significance of the study, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the conceptual framework, the definition of terms, the delimitations, the limitations, and the assumptions of the study.

The remaining chapters provide the extant literature and the methods of my study. Chapter II offers a review of the research literature on public relation practitioners' roles, public relations standards within public schools, public relations practitioners' code of ethics in public education, social media in public relations, and an analysis of materials used in administrator preparation programs. Chapter III details the specifics of the method of the study. The methodological design includes items such as selection of participants, context of the study, instrumentation, interview protocol, procedures utilized, and data analysis procedures. Next, Chapter IV details the data analysis of the results from the demographic questionnaire and individual interviews conducted with participants. Finally, Chapter V provides a discussion of the findings from the study and advances recommendations for future research and practice.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Criteria for Literature Selection

The purpose of this literature review was to identify academic studies and professional journal articles that provided historical, contextual, and relevant information about communication directors in public school districts. In addition, textbooks relating to public relations in public schools and community were also sought out. An extensive search uncovered the lack of current scholarly articles specific to public school districts and communication directors. Therefore, I broadened my scope of search to include public relations practitioners and their roles in businesses and organizations.

To conduct the literature search, I employed the use of various databases through the Sam Houston State University Library portal (i.e., Education Source, ERIC, PsychINFO, and PsycARTICLES). Initially, I searched using key words such as *communication director* and *public schools* and then incorporated the key words of *public relations* and *public relations practitioners.* In addition, I completed searches using the key words of *social media*, *communications*, and *public schools.* Finally, I conducted an extensive search of relevant studies and articles with the keywords of *public relations roles* and *public relations challenges.* My selection criteria included only peer-reviewed articles published after the year 2000. Also, Amazon searches were utilized to procure various textbooks related to public relations in public schools and communities. A section of the literature review provided analysis of materials used in administrator preparation programs I discovered during my Amazon search for scholarly textbooks about public relations in schools.

History of the Public Relations Position and Public Schools

Though early forms of public influence and communication management can be traced back to ancient civilizations, the establishment of the Publicity Bureau in 1900 cemented public relations as a profession (Crable & Vibbert, 1986). Historians credit Edward Bays as one of the fathers of public relations and the first author of the public relations textbook, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, in 1923. Bays also taught the first public relations college course at New York University in 1923, started the first public relations vocational course in the 1930s, and authored two additional books, *Propaganda* in 1928 and *Engineering of Consent* in 1947 (Crable & Vibbert, 1986). Also, in the 1920s, three books specific to public relations and public schools were authored (a) *Newspaper Publicity for the Public Schools* by Rollow Reynolds, (b) *Publicity and the Public Schools* by Clyde Miller and Fred Charles, and (c) *Public School Publicity* by Harlan Hines and Robinson Jones (Bagin, Gallagher, & Moore, 2008). In 1927, Moehlman's *Public School Relations* was the first text in educational administration which included public school relations and defined the concept as "organized factual informational service for the purpose of keeping the public informed of its educational program" (Bagin et al., 2008, p.12). Eleven years later, Moehlman authored a second text championing two-way communication between community relations and schools (Bagin et al., 2008).

Subsequently, various public relations trade associations and organizations originated to provide professional development, standards of excellence, codes of ethics, and networking resources to public relations practitioners. In 1935, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) was established to provide school communication

training and support to school leaders in the United States (NSPRA, 2016). The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) was established in 1947 and is the largest organization of public relations professionals with more than 22,000 public relations and communications specialists (PRSA, 2016). The Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) was chartered in 1962 and consists of more than "900 professionals who serve public school districts and education foundations of Texas" (TSPRA, 2016, para 1). Also, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) was founded in 1970 and maintains a global membership from more than 70 countries (IABC, 2016). The IABC has underwritten many research studies about the public relations profession and provides professional development and career education (IABC, 2016). In addition, both the PRSA and the IABC administered continuing education programs for professional accreditation of its members who complete oral and written exams to earn Accredited Public Relations (APR) credentials from the PRSA or Accredited Business Communication (ABC) credentials from the IABC. A variety of professional journals, newsletters, and trade magazines are also authored by these professional organizations for the benefit of the public relations professionals.

In the 1980s, parent options for school choice brought public relations into the forefront of public schools' communication management plans (Bagin et al., 2008). As parents became better educated and questioned decision making by school leaders, school districts looked for means to communicate more effectively with stakeholders. The opposing political and philosophical viewpoints about public school funding and function also increased the need for educational leaders to correspond with and interact successfully with all publics (Guthrie & Schuermann, 2010). More time and effort from

districts and school administration organizations such as the American Association of School Administrators recognized the need for stronger skillsets within school leaders to address communication management with internal and external publics (Bagin et al., 2008). General sessions and professional development seminars were offered by the professional organizations to better equip leaders in the public relations arena.

As the communication expectations of public school leaders increased, and the intensity of social media interactions continued to rise, district officials, specifically superintendents, depended more heavily on the services of specialists in meeting demands of their publics (Bagin et al., 2008). The title of the public relations professional in public schools varied depending on size of the district, but the line authority most often established the communication professional reporting directly to the superintendent (Moore et al., 2016). Researchers consistently recommended the public relations professional occupy a position in the superintendent's cabinet if the public relations person was to "explain, defend, or interpret school district policies properly to the public" (Bagin et al., 2008, p.60). In addition, the inclusion of the public relations person within the superintendent's cabinet also provided group insight to community attitudes and expectations due to the public relations professional 's connections and relationships within the external publics.

For public schools, public relations existed whether formally managed by appointed personnel or not (Moore, 2009). Proactive utilization of human resources and 21st century technologies in a well-developed communications plan was established as a solid foundation to the overall public education mission of student success (Bagin et al., 2008; Kowalski, 2011; Moore, 2009). The position of the public relations specialist and

communicator in public schools became a relevant and prominent role in the organizational chart of school administration in the 21st century.

Public Relations Practitioner Roles

The role of public relations practitioner continues to evolve in public school organizations. There was a time when public relations was viewed as an attempt at manipulation of public opinion, nothing more than press agentry, or a synonym for marketing and advertising (Kowalski, 2011). However, as public interest about educational practices and performance continued to increase, the function of a school's communication director evolved into a relationship-building role whose purpose included informing stakeholders, persuading publics, and integrating attitudes of the school with the attitudes of the publics served (Cohen, 1987). Wilcox, Ault, and Agee (1992) advocated that public relations professionals concentrated on deliberate and planned actions shaped by policy and practice serving multiple publics within a school's internal and external community through two-way communication. Today's communication specialists must be able to multi-task to satisfy a vast array of functions such as the following: engaging in community service, assisting decision makers, providing current, up-to-date information to all stakeholders, accessing information in a timely manner, exchanging information, empowering decision makers, and serving community interests (Kowalski, 2011). The size of the district determined the personnel allocations assigned to public relations' roles; however, Moore (2009) stressed communication happened whether purposely managed or specific objectives were planned. A discussion of some of the major roles and responsibilities of school public relations practitioners is provided.

District relations. Kowalski (2011) framed school administrator effectiveness by the communication knowledge of the social and cultural contexts of the school system. Building relationships within the internal publics of a district was a major role served by communication directors (Hughes & Hooper, 2000). Superintendents included the director of public relations as part of the district's administrative cabinet and depending on the size of the district, the director reported directly to the superintendent or assistant superintendent (Kowalski, 2011; Moore et al., 2016). Vieira and Grantham (2015) noted when public relations personnel were provided representation in the senior management cabinet and public relations activities were given credibility and time on agendas, the initiatives were empowered and more successful. Overall, responsibilities within the district included managerial and technical responsibilities. Communication directors administered programs, made resource allocation decisions, and provided technical assistance to other district officials who engaged in public relations activities (Kowalski, 2011; Moore et al., 2016).

Community relations. Holliday (1988) discussed four core processes utilized by public relations professionals with communities to establish and encourage proactive and constructive relationships with community members. These processes included (a) promoting school climates conducive to teaching and learning, (b) encouraging parental involvement, (c) building the public's knowledge of education, and (d) collaborating with community on projects to maximize resources. Encouraging open communication about key issues representative of district and community interests was indicative of an effective public relations program (Martinson, 1999). Johnston et al. (2002) purported superintendents understood schools function more efficiently and were more likely to

obtain their goals if relationships were built with the communities they served. Johnston et al. (2002) identified the following roles school leaders and public relations personnel play in school-community relationships:

- Understands history and culture of school district.
- Seeks input from multiple community groups for decision-making
- Participates in a variety of community organizations.
- Develops network of key community advocates and supporters.
- Oversees media relations plan.
- Performs tasks as face and contact point of the district in the community.

In a quantitative analysis of the connections between public relations and social capital and community engagement, Dodd, Brummette, and Hazleton (2015) examined the extent to which public relations managers and technicians participate in civic communications. Secondary data were gathered from the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau and participants were identified as public relations professionals through their self-selected occupations. Three distinct community activities were collapsed into the three classifications of (a) political involvement behaviors, (b) participation in voluntary organizations, and (c) personal interactions in community. Dodd et al. (2015) discovered public relations managers and technicians maintained a significantly greater engagement in political activities and personal interactions with community than the general population; however, voluntary organization attendance held the lowest indication of significance. The researchers theorized public relations professionals participated in political activities because of the knowledge held about the political environment and its effect on their organizations. Also, the personal behaviors and interactions like social

media engagement and online networking were identified by the communication specialists due to the nature of their employment. Low participation in voluntary organizations was attributed to lack of time for such activities due to the very nature of the public relations role being a 24-7 industry. Dodd et al. (2015) suggested similar studies to be completed utilizing the analysis of professional behaviors to make connections to civic engagement roles by public relations managers and technicians.

Crisis/conflict management. Moore et al. (2016) defined crisis as "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is pending" (p. 143). Public school communication directors served a major role during a time of crisis and conflict management. In her 1996 book, *Telling the Truth about America's Public Schools,* Amundson advocated administrators have three choices when responding to conflict or negativity about school practice. Administrators can ignore it, take a defensive posture, or communicate open and honestly. Public relations practitioners were charged with the responsibility and accountability to face crisis and conflict management through education of the public and often requested assistance in understanding and action.

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) provided helpful guidance through a comprehensive school crisis communication manual that provided step-by-step procedures and detailed policies for the public school communicator (NSPRA, 2016). NSPRA's compilation of materials served as an invaluable resource when communication directors were thrust into the role of crisis management. Public school communication directors were often the point of contact for personnel, community, and media and managed a multitude of communication channels and social media platforms during and after the crisis.

Moore (2009) addressed how quickly information will be passed on to the community due to the use of cell phones, text messages, and social media. Eyewitnesses communicated information before some people in the school system ever knew the details, therefore, the need for a well-developed crisis management plan was necessary to for collecting information from a variety of sources and communicating as quickly as possible through all media channels. A systematic methodology or reaction in a crisis by public relation practitioners brought some sense of control during a crisis (Kowalski, 2011). The communication director's role of overseeing and enacting a well-developed crisis management plan helped in the perception of school district competence, credibility, and trustworthiness so that continued goodwill was maintained (Bagin et al., 2009).

Current research studies. In a 2015 quantitative study, Vieira and Grantham attempted to define key public relations roles through factor-cluster analysis. Utilizing an online survey, the researchers gathered responses from 256 self-selected participants who held membership in the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Five main components were derived from the analysis. The role components were (a) brand officer, (b) press agent, (c) internal communicator, (d) negotiator, and (c) policy advisory. Participants in the brand officer role remarked they were mostly in a technician role focused on marketing initiatives to external publics with very little involvement in strategic planning of organizational goals. Brand officers were not part of the senior management's cabinet. Participants in press agentry were split between technician and managerial roles with a primary focus on external audiences, specifically media sources. Press agents participated in strategic planning with senior management when external

publics included media stakeholders. Participants in the internal communicator role were also split between technician and managerial roles and focused mostly on internal communication tactics. Internal communicators reported not being a part of the strategic management team, but did assist in the writing of communication materials. Participants in the negotiator position were mostly senior managers and viewed their role as consultants focused on internal and external publics. Negotiators participated in strategic management decisions, though they did not personally create the day-to-day materials used in planning or initiatives. Lastly, participants in the role of policy advisor viewed their function as a management position heavily involved in developing and executing the strategic plans of senior management. Overall, the participants with the most years of experience occupied the managerial roles with closer ties to cabinet positions with senior management and strategic planning of the organization. Vieira and Grantham (2015) concluded public relations roles continue to evolve and the required skills of the practitioners continue to change in the digital age with the advancement of new technologies and the globalization of business and organizations.

Much like the aforementioned study, Johansson and Larsson (2015) conducted a quantitative study to delve deeper into the context of managerial roles of public relations practitioners and sampled 261 public relations managers or public relations director-level positions in Swedish businesses using an online survey. Participants were randomly selected from people who held membership in the Swedish Public Relations Association. Five dimensions of public relations roles identified by the researchers were (a) monitor and evaluator, (b) issues management expert, (c) key policy and strategy advisory, (d) stakeholder expert, and (e) communication manager.

Monitor and evaluator encompassed the overall central managerial aspects of organization and control of the public relations functions of the organization with both internal and external audiences. Issues management expert managed all varieties of programs and initiatives that addressed issues or threats to the organization from internal and external publics or trends. The third dimension of key policy and strategy advisor identified by Johansson and Larsson (2015) encapsulated the role of liaison with senior management within media and political contexts and identified this dimension as also being spokesperson and media contact for the organization. The stakeholder expert dimension was responsible for advisement to top officials for all stakeholder relationships and included speech writing and drafting top official correspondence. Lastly, the dimension of communication manager encompassed the day-to-day support of public relations activities including supporting other department's public relation's needs, filtering of emails, monitoring social media, and aiding in solution of immediate communication issues within the organization.

Johansson and Larsson (2015) noted the complexity and broad spectrum of responsibilities assigned to public relations practitioners. Differences in the roles of public relations professionals in the private and public sector were uncovered. The private sector differentiated the functions among more personnel, possibly due to more employees designated for the public relations role. The researchers recommended more analyses in both sectors to better understand the public relations role.

In summary, Norris (1984) explained public relations would be better understood if public relations were referred to as public relationships. Communication with various publics and building relationships with stakeholders represented the framework for

successful public relations practitioner practice. Vieira and Grantham (2015) noted the technician and managerial roles in public relations organizations and the overlapping of the two roles in different tasks and initiatives of the position. Identifying the various functions fulfilled by public relations professionals revealed a relationship component in the numerous roles served by the communication director.

Public Relations Standards within Public Schools

According to the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), in their 2002 publication, *Raising the Bar for School PR*, "every school, school district and organization has public relations–just like everyone has a personality" (p. 1). NSPRA (2002) defined school public relations as:

> Educational public relations are a planned, systematic management function, designed to help improve the programs and services of an educational organization. It relies on a comprehensive, two-way communication process involving both internal and external publics with the goal of stimulating better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization. (p. 1)

Grunig (1992) concurred that communication programs exist to enhance an organization's effectiveness, and excellent public relation programs include the concepts of strategic management encompassing the modern theories of management. Block (1987) provided insight to strategic communications as, "it is a short-hand way of saying: make good policy and make it stick with consistent, intelligent communications" (p. 6). In October 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) convened to update standards for educational leaders that acknowledged their influence

on student achievement and provided guideposts to leaders in many arenas including communication among all publics (NPBEA, 2015).

Subsequently, the populations involved in the public school system continue to increase and communication plans must be in place to connect all stakeholders. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reported public elementary and secondary schools included 49.5 million students in membership during the 2010-2011 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). These same schools employed a total of 6.2 million full-time equivalent staff members with 7% representing administrative support staff (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). A comprehensive communication plan with standards addressing public school initiatives is necessary for districts to effectively outreach to all of these populations.

Standards of the public relations professional. To assist public school district leadership with the complex task of connecting to all stakeholders, a variety of standards have been published. In October 2015, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration adopted the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), formerly known as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, to assist district and school leaders with improvement in student achievement by challenging the profession, professional associations, and other organizations that support educational leaders and their professional development. National collaborations from educational organizations, foundations, and state officials recast the 2008 ISLLC standards with a "stronger, clearer emphasis on students and student learning, outlining foundational principles of leadership to help ensure that each child is well-educated and prepared for the 21st century" (NPBEA, 2015, p. 2). What did not change in the newly

composed standards was the inclusion of the verbiage “to promote” in the majority of the standards. The skill of promotion often lies in the ability to communicate effectively and the PSEL acknowledged this distinction. NPBEA’s (2015) professional standards included:

- Standard 1: Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student (p. 9).
- Standard 2: Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student’s academic success and well-being (p. 10).
- Standard 3: Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student’s academic success and well-being (p.11).
- Standard 4: Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student’s academic success and well-being (p. 12).
- Standard 5: Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student (p. 13).
- Standard 6: Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student’s academic success and well-being (p. 14).

- Standard 7: Effective educational leaders foster of professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being (p. 15).
- Standard 8: Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being (p. 16).
- Standard 9: Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being (p. 17).
- Standard 10: Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being (p. 18).

Additionally, in 2002, the NSPRA published standards for school districts to aid in the preparation of school public relation professionals and their public relations programs. At a minimum, NSPRA recommended public relation professionals possess a bachelor's degree from an accredited university and have public relations field experience. In addition, PR professionals should display "a comprehensive working knowledge of internal and external public relations and communications programs for the educational organization that they serve" (NSPRA, 2002, p. 3). Also, the NSPRA standards recommended public relations professionals have "an understanding of and commitment to the role of social responsibility of public relations and communications for all educational institutions, organizations, and agencies in a democratic society" (NSPRA, 2002, p. 3). Mastery of communication skills is necessary, along with knowledge of two-way communication between an organization and its stakeholders and the ability to implement programs and communication platforms that support two-way

dialogue (NSPRA, 2002). Finally, a public relations professional must hold a commitment to continuing professional development and membership in a variety of professional public relations associations (NSPRA, 2002).

NSPRA (2002) provided the following criteria for public schools that are developing strategic and comprehensive public relations programs:

- Possess a governing board.
- Possess written communication policies that guide all decision making.
- Possess written procedures that guide all actions.
- Position the communication director directly accountable to the superintendent and as a member of the superintendent's cabinet.
- Employ a communication director that is a strategic leader and not just an administrative manager.
- Provide regular opportunities for trainings.
- Use systematic planning processes for communication efforts.
- Utilize a variety of channels and methods of communication with all stakeholders.
- Employ an evaluation process of the public relations efforts at least every two years (p. 5-15).

In summary, public relations and communication aspects are a growing component of public school leadership. Policy and coordination decisions of communication are mostly made when an organization is in the start-up state and needs to create firm-specific communication resources (Siano, Vollero, Confetto, & Siglioccolo, 2013). However, standards of professional conduct and communication are not static and must be continually evaluated and updated to ensure alignment with student success

initiatives (NPBEA, 2015). A variety of standards exist for educational leaders to incorporate the skills and knowledge needed to work with a variety of stakeholders for student success. Many resources are available to assist leaders with implementation, development, and evaluation of the public relations and communication department of a public school district.

Public Relations Practitioners' Code of Ethics in Public Education

Due to the influential nature of the responsibilities woven into public relations roles, a variety of codes of ethics were written for different organizations and their membership (Bowen, 2013; Toledano & Avidar, 2016). Kowalski (2011) provided a working definition of professional ethics for education professionals to include moral action, human character, and duty to fairness, equality, and a sense of right in professional conduct. Subsequently, additional ethical considerations were determined as social media sites became a mainstay of communication channels and digital conversations became more prevalent for public relations professionals (Diaz-Campo & Segado-Boj, 2015; Phillips & Young, 2009).

As a chapter of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), the Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) adopted NSPRA's Code of Ethics for members in July 1981 (TSPRA, 2016). TSPRA's Code of Ethics stated:

The education public relations professional shall:

1. Be guided constantly by pursuit of the public interest through truth, accuracy, good taste and fairness; follow good judgment in releasing information; not intentionally disseminate misinformation or confidential data; avoid actions which lessen personal, professional or organizational reputation (TSPRA, 2016, para. 2).

2. Give primary loyalty to the employing organization, insisting on the right to give advisory council in accordance with sound public relations ideas and practices; cooperate with other groups while avoiding conflicts with primary responsibilities; object to untenable policies or activities (TSPRA, 2016, para. 2).
3. Be aware of personal influence, avoiding promises or granting of unprofessional advantages to others; refrain from accepting special considerations for influences on organizational decisions; avoid unauthorized use of organizational facilities, resources or professional services for personal gain or for promotion of the candidacy of aspirants to elected offices; forego derogatory acts or utterances against other professionals (TSPRA, 2016, para. 2).
4. Recognize that effectiveness is dependent upon integrity and regard for ideals of the profession; not misrepresenting professional qualifications; give credit for ideas and words borrowed from others; cooperate with professional colleagues to uphold and enforce this Code (TSPRA, 2016, para. 2).
5. A member shall, as soon as possible, sever relations with any organization or individual if such relationship requires conduct contrary to the articles of this Code (TSPRA, 2016, para. 2).

In July 1988, NSPRA adopted the following guidelines from the North American Public Relations Council:

A member shall:

1. Conduct his/her professional life in accord with the public interest (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).

2. Exemplify high standards of honesty and integrity while carrying out dual obligations to a client or employer and to the democratic process (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
3. Deal fairly with the public, with past or present clients or employers and with fellow practitioners, giving due respect to the ideal of free inquiry and to the opinions of others (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
4. Adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth, avoiding extravagant claims or unfair comparisons and giving credit for ideas and words borrowed from others (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
5. Not knowingly disseminate false or misleading information and shall act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which he/she is responsible (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
6. Not engage in any practice which has the purpose of corrupting the integrity of channels of communication or the processes of government (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
7. Be prepared to identify publicly the name of the client or employer on whose behalf any public communication is made (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
8. Not use any individual or organization professing to serve or represent an announced cause, or professing to be independent or unbiased but actually serving another or undisclosed interest (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
9. Not guarantee the achievement of specified results beyond the member's direct control (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).

10. Not represent conflicting or competing interests without the express consent of those concerned, given after a full disclosure of the facts (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
11. Not place himself/herself in a position where the member's personal interest is or may be in conflict with an obligation to an employer or client, or others, without full disclosure of such interests to all involved (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
12. Not accept fees, commissions, gifts or any other consideration from anyone except clients or employers for whom services are performed without their express consent, given after a full disclosure of the facts (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
13. Scrupulously safeguard the confidences and privacy right of present, former and prospective clients or employers (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).
14. Not intentionally damage the professional reputation or practice of another practitioner (TSPRA, 2016, para 4).

In addition, a variety of public relations organizations give guidance to educational communication practitioners with codes of ethics to aid in development of core values, mission statements, and ethical practices. Many of the codes established identify principles such as truthfulness, authenticity, respect, equity, and social responsibility (Baker & Martinson, 2002). For example, the Public Relations Society of America (2016) provided the following established standards of practice towards ethical PR practices:

> (a) Protect and advance the free flow of accurate and truthful information, (b) Foster informed decision making through open communication, (c) Protect confidential and private information, (d) Promote healthy and fair competition

among professionals, (e) Avoid conflicts of interest, and (f) Work to strengthen the public's trust in the profession (para 14).

Another ethics model concerning public relations principles was created by two professors of communication and journalism. Baker and Martinson (2002) established the Truthfulness, Authenticity, Respect, Equity, and Social Responsibility (TARES) test for public relations practitioners to apply to their work. The objective of the TARES test was to construct moral boundaries around the persuasive nature of their communication publications and actions. The acronym, TARES, represented the five principles of Truthfulness, Authenticity, Respect, Equity, and Social Responsibility. Truthfulness required absolute honesty in communication efforts without the spin of statements holding some truths in order to deceive and spin verbiage towards a specific goal. Authenticity mandated personal integrity from the public relations professional and asked the originator of the communication material to be willing to publicly and openly attach their name and credentials to the material. Respect was the principle that required respectful acknowledgment of the receiver of the communication by the format and persuasion techniques provided. Equity was synonymous with fairness; parity must exist between the communication professional and the author. Lastly, the principle of Social Responsibility represented the acknowledgment of the public relations professionals that their work was part of a larger audience and a bigger picture in society and should take into account the effect on all publics. In summary, the TARES test was a model for application to press releases and public communications to ascertain the proliferation of morally and ethically sound communication efforts of public relations professionals and represented another ethical standard established for communication specialists.

According to research conducted by Diaz-Campo and Segado-Boj (2015), only a small number of codes of ethics incorporated guidelines and rules for online conduct of journalism staffs and public relations personnel, though a majority of the organizations occupied some type of online organizational presence. Expectations existed of the researchers for updated codes of ethics to include digital communication directives for organizations. The growing presence of organizations in the social media world requires such updates in their codes of ethics.

Social Media and Public Relations

Social media sites (SMSs) have increased the opportunities for public relations professionals to communicate with their publics with ease and immediacy. All types of organizations joined SMSs to enhance their businesses, build brands, and communicate with stakeholders (Curtis et al., 2010; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Although blogging has become the most utilized form of online business communication, other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become popular SMSs for organizations and their publics (Go & You, 2016; Moreno, Navarro, Tench, & Zerfass, 2015). Founded in 2004, Facebook reported 1.04 billion daily active users on average for December 2015 (Facebook, 2016). Twitter's origin followed in 2006 and reported an average of 320 million active monthly users at the end of 2015 (Twitter, 2016). In addition, 73% of teenagers engage is some form of social networking (Neiger et al., 2012) and adults are not far behind with 65% of the population engaging in social networking (Schultz, 2009). Research studies consisted of an increased interest in the influence social media played in the public relations plan of organizations. Along with the heightened awareness of SMSs outreach and influence, organizations recognized the challenges faced by time

limitations, limited resources, and increased personnel demands to provide productive online activity.

Public schools. O'Reilly and Matt (2013) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the way schools and other organizations communicated with the public. School superintendents from across the United States (n = 73) completed a questionnaire. Over 61% of homes were estimated to utilize the internet and the prominence of real-time information reaching stakeholders was reported. Although superintendents noted barriers to effective communication being time and personnel, these district leaders recognized social media dialogues affected public opinion about their districts. O'Reilly and Matt (2013) provided a system for schools to develop *key communicators* in the district to be cognizant of issues faced by organizations and helped strategize messages to disseminate information to the public. Personnel job duties were addressed so as to effectively manage social media tasks and take advantage of online relationship building exercises with the public (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Yin, 2011; Jiang, Luo, & Kulemeka, 2016; Lee, Sha, Dozier, & Sargent, 2015; O'Reilly & Matt, 2013).

In a subsequent qualitative study about social media and school superintendents, Cox and McLeod (2014) investigated the experiences of school superintendents who incorporated multiple social media platforms into their communication plans and the reasons they chose to use social media to communicate with stakeholders. Telephone and in-person interviews were collected from 12 school superintendents from various regions in the United States and Canada. The superintendents viewed social media as a complement to their already established communication plan that incorporated more traditional methods like newsletters and e-mail blasts. Social media platforms allowed for more transparency regarding finance and decision-making processes and

stronger connections to local stakeholders. In addition, utilization of social media meant that superintendents had more frequent interactions with their constituents and these constituents could obtain information in a multi-modal way. Finally, the superintendents' reported professional and personal growth increased due to their engagement in social media. Cox and McLeod (2014) stated social media use was becoming expected in leadership, and leaders could not turn their backs on the phenomenon. The researchers suggested leaders embrace the social media movement and add some form of social media to their communication plans with stakeholders and advocated these tools were an integral component of 21st century school leadership.

Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, Carpenter, Robertson, Johnson, and Blum (2014) investigated social media analytics in an educational context to determine the presence of discussions on social media about schools, the sentiment of those discussions, and the various topics about education on social media sites. One hundred school districts were randomly chosen from a population list maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics. A quantitative analysis used descriptive statistics to determine the salience and sentiment of the messages posted on social media sites about school districts. A qualitative analysis using inductive coding was performed to determine how school districts were discussed on social media sites. Eight themes developed from the coding were operations, people, community outreach, secondary mentions, politics and policy, controversy, performance, and safety. Carpenter et al. (2014) determined frequency of school district discussion was not prominent among vast populations. However, concentrated audiences engaged in repeated dialogues concerning school district information. The researchers also discovered that the overall majority of sentiments were positive with the most prevalent theme being people. YouTube was portrayed as the most positive social media channel to represent school life and recognize accomplishments within schools. Recommendations were given to

school leaders to utilize social media communications as listening channels for community dynamics about education. Also, discussions of the risk versus reward in schools' social media presence were provided. Carpenter et al. (2014) posited school leaders cannot ignore the presence of social media and the opportunities provided for marketing, branding, and message delivery with today's publics.

Corporations and businesses. Because limited studies were located about social media and educational context, some recent studies in the business context are reviewed. Use of social media in other disciplines can be helpful when limited information exists in education. Men and Tsai (2015) conducted a quantitative study to examine how various corporate characters were affected by public engagement and organization-public relationships. One hundred and seventy college students and 80 nonstudent Facebook users who followed at least one company's Facebook page completed a web-based survey. Corporate character was shown to be shaped by social networking sites (SNS) maintained by the organizations. Perceptions held by the public were influenced by the SNS of the organizations and the public engagement process and relationships were cultivated by their online activities. Men and Tsai (2015) concluded SNS utilization was a valuable public engagement tool exploited by resourceful companies and organizations. Online-relationship building was viewed as a productive asset to organizational growth.

In a 2015 qualitative study, Alkhyeli and Mansour assessed experiences of the public in Abu Dhabi with their use of various social media platforms to support the decision-making processes used by police departments. Surveys were gathered and analysis of the responses allowed for themes to develop about the public's perception of how decisions were reached within a governmental agency. Participants stressed the

value for creating a real, interactive platform that allowed for two-way communication between the public and the police. A decentralized model of decision-making was viewed as ideal so as to distribute the decision-making process to a local level where more input could be included. The centralized decision-making model placed the handling of important issues at the top of the organization's hierarchy and was not seen as best practice due to the lack of information about specific circumstances, cases, and law gathered at this level. Alkhyeli and Mansour (2015) concluded utilizing knowledge at the local level to reach decisions was best supported by all publics. Organizations influenced public perception of effectiveness and decision-making by including constituents. Social media platforms were an avenue allowing more local involvement.

Social media platforms. Go and You (2016) conducted a qualitative study to investigate how organizations strategically utilized social media platforms to build relationships with their publics. The authors used a dataset collected from a case study of 318 organizations' engagement in 15 social media applications for the purposes of communication and marketing. Organizations included for-profits, nonprofits, health-care services, and financial services. Blogs were the most utilized social media platform and virtual worlds were the most underutilized. Facebook and Twitter were among the most popular choices for social networking. Though most organizations rely on one platform in social media, many use a variety of social media venues. Go and You (2016) concluded decisions related to the amount of engagement incurred by an organization depended if one-way or two-way communication was desired.

Cho, Schweickart, and Haase (2014) determined whether differences existed in the levels of stakeholder engagement across the four types of message strategies provided

by communication strategy authors, Grunig and Hunt (1984). A content analysis of the Facebook pages of 100 of the largest nonprofit organizations was performed. The researchers discovered publics were more apt to engage in two-way, symmetrical communication with organizations, which in turn helped to build authentic, trusting relationships between the organization and the public. Organizations utilizing only Facebook for information dissemination did not encourage dialogues to occur with stakeholders. The authors determined organizations that failed to capitalize on the two-way dialogic capabilities of Facebook did not take advantage of the intent of the social media platform's purpose and entire scope of its effectiveness in building relationships.

Waters et al. (2009) examined how social networking platforms aided nonprofit organizations in the advancement of their mission and goals in a quantitative study. The researchers performed a content analysis of 275 Facebook profiles of nonprofits, which included the arts and humanities, healthcare, education, religious organizations, and societal organizations. Organizational disclosure, information dissemination, and organization involvement were the three areas evaluated. Organizations failed to engage in the majority of Facebook applications offered, thereby not optimizing Facebook's reach to stakeholders. Information dissemination was the most popular component used by organizations, which meant only one-way dialogic communication was initiated. The researchers concluded organizations failed to utilize the power of social media networking to advance organizational objectives and practices needed improvement to enhance strategic involvement utilizing the Internet.

Subsequently, another quantitative study by Waters and Jamal (2011) examined how nonprofit organizations used Twitter to engage their publics. Twenty-seven

nonprofits were randomly selected from the top 200 fund raising nonprofits and a content analysis was performed on the tweets sent during March 2010. Public information dissemination was the most popular use of Twitter among the organizations. Organizations rarely used emoticons in their tweets to express emotions. Press agentry was the least common use of the social media platform. When two-way dialogue was initiated, organizations were more apt to engage in asymmetrical communication than symmetrical on Twitter. Waters and Jamal (2011) determined that symmetrical dialogue consisted mostly of requests to engage with an organization's other communication platforms such as websites, poll, or surveys. The authors concluded Twitter was mainly used as an information sharing online platform instead of a relationship building strategy. The full potential of social media's capabilities was not realized by the organizations.

In a specific example of Twitter's reach to the public, Smith (2010) performed a qualitative study to explore the power shift of social media from public relations practitioners to ordinary, everyday social media users by analyzing the involvement of Twitter users. Using the 7.0 Haiti earthquake as a backdrop, Smith (2010) conducted a content analysis of over 1,400 tweets related to relief efforts and further discovered organizational legitimacy increased due to communication efforts and engagement by Twitter followers. The messages/tweets examined allowed for collaboration and two-way dialogue about issues. The researchers concluded social media platforms such as Twitter permitted social promotion and the connection of many publics. Social media platforms were more than just a message board that disseminated one-way information.

Evaluation and perceived effectiveness. Curtis et al. (2010) conducted a quantitative study to determine the ways public relations professionals were integrating

social media into their job functions. In addition, the credibility attributed to social media activity by the practitioners was evaluated. Online surveys were administered and 409 practitioners' responses were retrieved. Almost all participants (n = 404) replied they had some type of organizational social media presence. Organizations with a public relations department were more entrenched in social media applications and used social media tools to implement strategies and harness social media's influence for organizational goals. The authors concluded nonprofits' outreach in social media would continue to grow as they become more mindful of the influence and effectiveness in reaching target publics and advancing the organizations' goals.

In a qualitative study, Taylor and Kent (2010) examined the socialization of public relation practitioners with regard to the importance attributed to social media in their professions. A content analysis was conducted of 12 *Public Relations Tactics* issues using all commentary about social media in the articles. Claims of social media's influence were greater than the evidence corroborating the effectiveness of social media. Taylor and Kent (2010) attributed the perceived importance of social media for an organization to the media recognition given to the topic. Suggestions were offered by the researchers that provided more diverse voices in the socialization process of new public relation practitioners, and a continued development of practitioners and academics is needed.

In another qualitative study, DiStaso, McCorkindale, and Wright (2011) conducted 25 web-based interviews with public relations practitioners to ascertain opinions about the driving force behind social media platforms in organizations. In addition, challenges faced by the communication professionals were elicited, along with

opinions about the challenges encountered in managing social media tasks and evaluating the effectiveness of their efforts. Participants held mixed beliefs about social media's effect on overall financial profits of an organization, though all acknowledged organizations must maintain awareness of the conversations held about their organizations and participate in the dialogue. A prominent concern among participants was accepting the lack of control a social media presence can create for an organization. In addition, participants noted time management of the social media environment as a challenge. Organizations created policies to aid institutional control and additional trainings were required to navigate the evolving world of social media platforms.

Briones et al. (2011) explored the utilization and effectiveness of social media to communicate with various key publics through a qualitative study. Forty phone interviews were conducted with participants from the American Red Cross whose job duties included managing social media tasks. The authors discovered relationships were built through the two-way dialogues established through social media connections. Facebook and Twitter were the most common platforms utilized by both large and small chapters of the Red Cross. In addition to collaboration achieved through social media, nonprofits used social media to "streamline management functions, educate the public about programs and services, and communicate with constituent" (Briones et al., 2011, p. 38). Briones et al. (2011) reported the barriers of social media utilization were time and staff, and the need to constantly monitor social media sites and update information was costly and time-consuming. In addition, older generations were still lagging behind in their use of social media platforms to stay informed; therefore, organizations needed to

maintain awareness of the need for multiple communication resources and not rely on only one online avenue to interact with the public.

A subsequent study conducted five years after Taylor and Kent's (2010) research, Moreno et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study to investigate how public relation practitioners' personal and professional use of social media influences their opinions of social media. The authors surveyed 2,710 professionals from 43 European countries working on different hierarchical levels in communication agencies and departments. The majority of communication professionals purported the relevance of social media messages on the perceptions of organizations. Practitioners with a high level of involvement with social media gave more significance to the impact of social media on internal and external stakeholders. Professional communicators were viewed as the gatekeepers of their organizations with the five most important social media tools being online communities, online videos, mobile applications, blogs, and photos. Moreno et al. (2015) suggested the overestimation of social media value might be attributed to the substantial significance placed upon this venue by communication professionals (DiStaso et al., 2011; Taylor & Kent, 2010).

To advance evaluation of social media effectiveness, Effing and Spil (2016) conducted a qualitative study to develop an evaluation framework that analyzed social media engagement and strategies of organizations. Nine organizations from three different countries were selected for case studies and 25 interviews were conducted with public relation professionals. Social media implementation within the organization had to be present beyond the initial stage of engagement so as to have sufficient data to analyze. Three stages (initiation, diffusion, and maturity) were discovered to identify the

development of an organization's social media strategy by the authors. In the initiation stage, social media channel and the target audience was identified. Policy, goals, and resources were acknowledged in the diffusion stage, and monitoring of online activities happened in the maturity stage. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Google+ were the most popular channel choices of engagement; however, goals were not often strategically aligned to organizational goals. Effing and Spil (2016) determined content was rarely planned before publication on social media and monitoring of activities was also not planned or common. The researchers concluded more reliable means of evaluation and monitoring were needed for organizations to effectively take advantage of social media platforms and strategically manage an organization's online public persona.

Personnel considerations. In another qualitative study, Lee et al. (2015) examined the reasons new public relations professionals were given the role of social media practitioner in the organization. The researchers engaged in face-to-face interviews with 20 college-degreed public relations practitioners in their 20s who had less than five years of experience in the field of public relations. Though most of the professionals spent a large amount of time with social media tasks, their job responsibilities also included other tasks such as research and planning for various public relations campaigns. Engagement in social media was a skill set developed through a variety of roles enacted by the young practitioners, and the time-consuming nature of social media practices often made the tasks fall to junior staff members due to budgetary initiatives (Briones et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2015). The researchers stressed young public relations professionals seek mentorship and diversity in duties to continue professional development and growth and resist being relegated to only social media tasks.

In 2016, Jiang et al. conducted a quantitative study to examine the role of social media in public relation practitioners' daily work activities. Four hundred and sixty-one responses were garnered from a wide-range of participants of U.S.-based corporations and nonprofit and for-profit organizations. Practitioners' perceptions of social media use, their years of experience and organizational position, and the size of the organization were included in the analysis. The researchers discovered a positive correlation between public relations practitioners' years of experience and their use of social media. In addition, positive communicative leadership behaviors were viewed as a result of increased social media use in the job functions of the public relations practitioners. Social media management was determined to play a role in the perception of positive leadership qualities and behaviors.

Research conducted over the last few years about social media practices in public relations provided insight into its effectiveness in the communication world. Though a majority of organizations, for-profit and nonprofit, were engaged in online networking, many organizations only engaged in one-way dialogic interactions and did not take full advantage of all tools available in social media platforms. Although blogging is the most prominent social media tool used within organizations, Facebook and Twitter are the most common online sites utilized by both organizations and stakeholders. With the increase in social media activity about educational systems, issues, and practices, school leaders recognized a social media presence was part of the current communication plan for a district (Porterfield & Carnes, 2012).

Analysis of Materials and Curricula Used in Administrator and Public Relations Preparation Programs

During the literature review process, I became increasingly aware of the lack of up-to-date materials available to the communication director or public relations professional in the public school system. Interestingly, a recent search of colleges and universities that offered a bachelor's in public relations revealed 250 institutions of higher learning provided the degree (College Board, 2016). I performed a search of Amazon Books to identify the top selling resources available for public relations practitioners in schools. The following four resources were discovered and a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each text was determined.

Book 1: *Public Relations in Schools.* According to Amazon Books, Kowalski's 5th edition publication of *Public Relations in Schools* was one of the top-selling school public relations book. Published in 2011, a summary of the book asserted the text's integration of theory and knowledge to improve practices of public relations programs in schools. Strengths of the text included (a) case studies for relevant discussions, (b) suggested activities to promote engagement and critical thinking, (c) a new chapter about technology in public school communications, and (d) focus on public opinion and decision making. However, in the past five years from the book's publication in 2011, much of the information about technological practices has been updated. Technology advances occurred at a rapid pace and references to various websites, technological applications, and practices made the content appear outdated. In addition, the framework references many theories over 30 years old and applicability seemed weak to current

public relations practices. Finally, possible and probable solutions to the case study examples would have provided an invaluable resource for the reader.

Book 2: *School Public Relations for Student Success.* In 2009, Moore published *School Public Relations for Student Success* with a concentrated focus for public relations professionals' impact on student growth and accomplishment. Unlike other textbooks, the focus of student achievement gave the profession of communication specialists' credibility and a sound purpose for its role in education. Another strength of the text was the organization of chapters utilizing the audiences of public relations practitioners (i.e., employees, parents, students, volunteers, media, seniors, businesses, and community). By breaking out the various publics served by school leaders' communication efforts, accessibility of information was direct and straightforward. In addition, numerous chapters were devoted to aiding in the creation of various types or correspondences that were relevant to all school leaders in communication practices. Finally, comprehensive questions or examples were provided at the end of each chapter for relevancy to the reader and application for practitioners. Published in 2009, Moore's text lacked the current practices needed by school public relations practitioners in today's technological world where immediacy of information is the challenge at the forefront of many school administrators.

Book 3: *Public Relations for School Leaders.* Hughes' and Hooper's *Public Relations for School Leaders* published in 2000 was presented by Amazon as one of the top-selling books on public relations in schools, though its content had not been updated in 16 years. Referenced as different from traditional school public relations text because of its solid conceptual and research base, the text's lack of current examples in today's

school communities failed to provide a relevant foundation for practices. Case studies and examples were rooted in educational context; however, discussion and applicability lacked current trends and technological advances of the public relations world of the 21st century. In addition, the tone and language of the text was often technical and complicated which made the applicability of the section on building a communications plan difficult to follow and not practical. Touted as more of a text for graduate work, the resource was not for the public relations professional who needed a guidebook or reference for current positioning and practices in education.

Book 4: *The School and Community Relations.* Of the most popular and top-selling textbooks about public relations and school communities, Moore et al.'s *The School and Community Relations* was the most current publication in 2016 and was in its 11th edition. Reviewed as an actual practice guide to allow for successful implementation of a public relations program with a school community, the book was arranged in a simplistic four-part organization structure of (a) essential considerations, (b) relations with special publics, (c) communication tools, and (d) evaluation tools and resources. In Part I, content about essential considerations gave a historical context to why public relations was practiced and also provided policies and strategy examples to help in implementation of practices. Part II provided researched-based practices about building relationships with the various publics served by communication specialists and school leaders. Part III delivered summaries and examples of many current communication tools utilized by public relations professionals in the 21st century. In addition, an extensive list of news sources and activities were provided to aide school public relations personnel in their endeavors to connect their school's initiatives and

events to the outside community. Finally, Part IV provided the reader with evaluation tools and processes to effectively assess a school's public relations program. Also, theoretical perspectives for the need for evaluation were established. Overall, the text provided research-based strategies about public relations implementation in the educational setting. Of all four texts reviewed and suggested by Amazon Books, this text was the most current and up-to-date in its positioning of technological communication within internal and external publics. References to social media sites, applications, and online publications were relevant and current. Overall, the content consisted of purposeful and useful information for the communications professional and school leader and provided real-world examples for application and evaluation with student achievement as the focus.

Public relations curricula. In a recent 2016 quantitative study by Auger and Cho, the researchers examined the content of public relations curricula in higher education institutions and sought to determine if public relations programs were properly preparing graduates for entry-level positions or advanced opportunities. A two-stage content analysis was completed from 234 colleges and universities with online curricula and a sampling of 128- job descriptions and postings from- the employment center of the Public Relations Society of America. Differences and similarities were noted across the three colleges of business, liberal arts, and journalism. The researchers determined curricula of Communications Basic, Writing, and PR Techniques were provided by all three colleges of study. In addition, an internship class was equally likely to be offered by each college; however, the journalism college was half as likely to offer a PR practicum course as the liberal arts and business college. Also, business schools were

less likely to offer media ethics courses and classes in issues management and crisis communication. The researchers concluded the education offered to public relations college students was providing an adequate set of skills for entry-level positions into the field of communications. However, a gap of instruction still existed in the area of social media skills and crisis management through this communication channel.

Summary

In summary, the ever-changing dynamics in educational contexts and public relations practices necessitate more resources for public relations professionals and school leaders. Current literature specific to communication professionals in public education was lacking in its up-to-date portrayal of practices and current policies. A greater variety of resources is needed to provide guidance for a profession that continues to expand each year in education. In addition, colleges and universities must continually update curricula and teachings to incorporate the ever-changing dynamics of the public relations field to better prepare their students to navigate the profession successfully.

CHAPTER III

Method

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of communication directors in public schools in the 21st century. The roles and challenges faced by communication directors continue to change as stakeholder demands and expectations change. Expectations required of public school communication directors have evolved during the 21st century and the investigation of these expectations provided insight into the demands of the position. The following sections are addressed in this chapter: (a) research design, (b) selection of participants, (c) context of the study, (d) instruments, (e) procedures, (f) trustworthiness, and (g) data analysis.

This study consisted of one overarching research question: What are the experiences of communication directors in public schools in the 21st century? Qualitative research inquiry is most appropriate to address a question of this nature as it is often used to gain insight into the meaning people give to their perceptions, experiences, and occurrences in their lives (Bogdan & Bilken, 2006; Creswell, 2014). The "wide- and deep-angle lens" attributed to qualitative research provided an opportunity for a plethora of rich data to be accumulated in an exploratory, bottom-up approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 36).

Research Design

Qualitative research reveals how "parts work together to form a whole and it assumes meaning is embedded in people's experiences and that meaning is mediated through the investigations and perceptions" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Patton (2015) posited

this understanding of meaning is the end in itself and the aim of qualitative research is not to make predictions about what will happen but to make meaning of life through the eyes of the participant. The insider's view of the researcher is termed the emic perspective (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Data collection and analysis is conducted by the researcher through fieldwork and a primarily inductive research strategy is utilized (Merriam, 1998).

In seeking to examine the lived experiences of a specific group of individuals, a transcendental phenomenological research design was employed in this study. Traced back to philosophical projects completed in the mid-1890s with the work of German mathematician and philosopher Edmond Husserl, transcendental phenomenology grew out of the underpinnings and tenets of the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant (Husserl, 1977). Kant remarked "to know a thing there must be intuition through which the object is given and a concept by which the object is thought to correspond to the intuition" (Bennet, 1966, p. 73). Husserl (1977) was concerned with the object being described and not just explained, and that the description provided the experience and therefore the meaning. Husserl expressed dissatisfaction with the systematic transcendental philosophizing purported in Kant's philosophies and remarked "if one became willingly engrossed in such a system, one could not deny the force and moment of its thought-constructions" (Husserl, 1977, p. 3). Husserl argued that the foundation of knowledge lies in one's recognition of one's structure of consciousness and that one's only certainty is one's experience in the world (Husserl, 1977). Husserl's method of transcendental phenomenology required the suspension of judgement while relying on the

intuitive grasp of knowledge, free of presuppositions, and intellectualizing (Husserl, 1977).

In the early 1970s, American psychologist Giorgi's work expanded on the principles of Husserl. Giorgi (1970) developed the descriptive phenomenological method in psychology and advocated a human science approach to research that avoided reductionist tendencies. Researchers were to bracket their personal biases and assumptions so as to maintain objectivity and attend to participants' descriptions and perceptions without applying predetermined meanings (Giorgi, 1970). Being given and being interpreted are two descriptions of the same situation and is an important distinction of these basic tenets of descriptive phenomenology (Mohanty, 1985). This phenomenological intuition is represented as consciousness presented in a certain mode of givenness and generalities are not statistical probabilities nor universal truths, but are dependent upon the lived meaning of the phenomenon being described by participants (Giorgi, 1970).

Furthermore, Moustakas, often credited as the father of transcendental phenomenology, summarized transcendental phenomenology as "a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49). Merleau-Ponty (1962) stated "perception is the path, the access to truth" (p. xvi). However, Moustakas distinguished the tenets of transcendental phenomenology from Husserl's writings by acknowledgement of the epoché, or "the disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgment regarding the phenomenon being investigated" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). Whereas Husserl introduced noesis, the act of perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering, or judging, Moustakas

distinguished bracketing where judgement is suspended from the natural world so as to focus on analysis of participants' reported experience (Moustakas, 1994). By utilizing this technique of bracketing, I sought to view the phenomenon of the public school communication director as for the first time and set aside prejudgments from my personal experience. In summary, the transcendental phenomenological approach, as described by Moustakas, was the appropriate qualitative research design for the research question posed in this investigation.

Selection of Participants

The selection of participants for a study or the sampling of a population often involves making a variety of decisions about what people to include in the research, where to locate the participants, and if there are specific characteristics required (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Although much quantitative research attempts to make generalizations among populations through probabilistic or random sampling (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007), qualitative researchers are more interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed through their experiences within the world (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, nonprobability sampling is more appropriate in qualitative research.

To select the participants for a qualitative study, many decisions were undertaken. Miles et al. (2014) contended qualitative research samples tend to be smaller and purposive, and the initial decisions in sampling often lead to different paths of study. Therefore, making decisions with "boundaries and frames" in mind is helpful to the researcher (Miles et al., 2014, p. 147). The following decisions included in the selection

of participants in a phenomenological study are (a) sampling strategy, (b) sample size, and (c) criteria for participants.

Sampling strategy. The most common form of nonprobabilistic sampling is purposive (Merriam, 1998) or purposeful (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling allows the researcher to specify characteristics of interest in participants and then locate and select these individuals for the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Morse 1991). Creswell (2013) acknowledged the importance of this decision to "gain access and establish a rapport with these participants so they will provide good data" (p. 147). It is this purposive sample that will answer the question of the researcher's investigation (Creswell, 2013). Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance and is useful for identifying and understanding cases that are information rich (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Variation sampling is a sampling strategy aimed to sample for heterogeneity within participants to acquire a diverse group of characteristics (Creswell, 2013).

Using purposeful sampling with a combination of criterion and variation sampling, I identified various communication directors within Region 4 and Region 6 districts within Texas. Region 4 and Region 6 are two of the service centers that collectively serve the Greater Houston-area districts located in Harris and Montgomery counties. Both of these two service centers are represented in the Houston/Beaumont branch of TSPRA where selection of participants occurred. Creswell (2013) remarked employing levels of sampling and using a variety of techniques are effective plans for qualitative research. Also, purposeful sampling is used in qualitative analysis because it allows the researcher to choose participants who can purposefully bring insight to the

research question and study. Variation sampling allows advanced criteria to be determined beforehand so the researcher can choose participants who differ on the criteria, thereby allowing for different themes to emerge from the variation (Creswell, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Criteria for participant selection. As noted previously, purposeful sampling with a combination of criterion and variation sampling were utilized. When variation sampling is selected as part of the sampling strategy at the beginning of the research, the likelihood increases that different perspectives and revelations will be garnered about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Participants in this study were communication directors who are currently employed in public school districts from Region 4 and Region 6 in the Greater Houston area. Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that by identifying participants who meet a certain criterion, quality assurance is greater. At least 3 years of experience in the field of school public relations was required to be a participant so as to capture the experience of the changes that have occurred in the field of school public relations. Also, I purposefully selected communication directors of different genders and ethnicities so as to obtain diverse perspectives. In addition, participants were also members of the TSPRA. TSPRA is a "nonprofit, professional organization dedicated to promoting public schools through effective communications" (TSPRA, 2016, para. 1). With more than 900 members, TSPRA is "composed primarily of public information and communication professionals who serve the public school districts and education associations, foundations, and organizations of Texas" (TSPRA, 2016, para. 1). I recruited my sample participants from this state organization.

Sample size. Determining the appropriate number of participants to include in the study was the next step in the selection of participants. Although it is important in quantitative research for a sample size to be representative of the population being studied (Johnson & Christensen, 2014), Creswell (2013) reported that qualitative design is more of a determining factor when selecting the number of participants to include. For phenomenological research, Creswell (2013) recommended three to 10 participants. Merriam (1998) stressed there is no definitive answer for appropriate sample size in qualitative research, yet it is the "adequate number of participants, sites, or activities needed to answer the questions posed at the beginning of the study" (p. 64).

One other way to determine the appropriate sample size is to sample until a point of saturation (Charmaz, 2014; Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher should look at the questions being asked and when redundancy is reached (saturation), the sampling size is deemed sufficient (Guest et al., 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse, 1991). Charmaz (2014) remarked that when no new insights are revealed, saturation of data has been achieved. Therefore, the sample size may need to be altered in the data collection phase to answer the research questions adequately. Guest et al. (2006) achieved saturation with as few as six participants and purported six interviews were sufficient when the researcher was interested in obtaining "high-level, overarching themes . . . for development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations (p.78). Therefore, I initially planned to include six participants in my study and assess the data once the interviews were concluded. I ascertained no more interviews were needed to reach saturation after all data were analyzed.

Context of the Study

As of August 2015, the state of Texas consisted of 1,266 public school districts that are served by 20 regional educational service centers (Texas Education Agency, 2015). Region 4 and Region 6 are two of the service centers that collectively serve the Greater Houston-area districts located in Harris and Montgomery counties. These regions were selected due to my membership in each Region's TSPRA group. According to the Public Education Information Management System's 2013-2014 staffing data, Texas employs 402 staff members among public schools whose primary role is coded under communications (Texas Education Agency, 2015). The research was conducted with participants from this population who met the criteria established for this study.

Instruments

Phenomenological research is not experimental or comparative, and therefore, the process of data collection outcomes should be treated as "exciting opportunities to potentially learn something important about the phenomenon" (Vagle, 2014, p. 79). The interview is the primary data collection method of phenomenological research (Sokolowski, 1999). The person conducting the interview, observing the participant, and recording responses is a major part of this data collection instrument (Creswell, 2013). In this section, the role of the researcher, instrumentation, and data collection processes are detailed.

Role of the researcher. Researchers are the main research tool in qualitative inquiry; therefore, it is important for the researchers to take into account their role and perspectives in the context of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2014). Van Manen (1990) stressed that the researcher must establish a strong relationship with the

phenomenon under investigation and cannot afford to adopt an attitude of "so-called scientific disinterestedness" (p. 33). By remaining strong in their orientation to the phenomenon, researchers have less opportunities and temptations to get side-tracked or lose focus (Van Manen, 1990). However, Moustakas (1994) used the Greek word epoché to guide researchers in their ability to look at things in a new way and to abstain from viewing the everyday in an ordinary way. Moustakas (1994) stressed the importance of the researcher being "completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening and hearing participants describe their experience of the phenomenon" (p. 22).

As an emic researcher who has close ties to the world of communications in public schools, it was necessary to bracket my experiences and biases in the research (Moustakas, 1994). I attempted to set aside my personal experiences as a public school district communication director so I could obtain the truest perspective of the participants. Moustakas (1994) recognized that complete objectivity by the researcher is impossible because of the values and experiences that the researcher brings to the study. The axiological philosophical paradigm of acknowledging that research is value-laden with present biases is acknowledged in my research paradigm (Creswell, 2013). By engaging in the practice of reflexivity (Creswell, 2014; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Vagle, 2014), I reflected on how my role in the study and how my personal background shaped the interpretations and meanings I obtained and ascribed to the data acquired.

Interview protocol. In phenomenological research, the interview is the primary form of data collection (Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowoski, 1999). Patton (2015) contended that qualitative interviewing allowed the researcher to enter into the inner world of

another person and obtain their perspective about an experience. In a two-step process, I conducted individual interviews with multiple public school district communication directors.

Step 1: Individual interview. Individual, face-to-face interviews are also considered in-depth interviews because of the amount of information that can be obtained about the participant's perspective (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Moustakas (1994) suggested following three different methods for conducting the individual, face-to-face interviews: (a) informal interviewing, (b) open-ended questioning, and (c) topical-guided interviewing. Each method provides the researcher with an opportunity to obtain different descriptions of the phenomenon being studied. I utilized open-ended questions, along with the topical-guided approach in my interviews. In addition, I employed the interview guide approach (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). I entered the interview session with a plan to explore specific topics and to ask specific open-ended questions of the interviewee. In contrast to the standardized open-ended interview, the interview guide approach allowed for more flexibility in the interview protocol and the order of the questions asked (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Individual interview questions were developed using the protocols suggested by Spradley (1979). The types of Spradley's questions I include were (a) Grand Tour, (b) Mini-Tour, (c) Example, and (d) Experience. I designed my questions to include each of these types to elicit responses that provided thick, rich data (Moustakas, 1994; Spradley, 1979). Broad, open-ended questions examined overall experiences and then specific questioning explored the challenges faced by public school district communication directors. The interview questions were piloted with two communication directors to

improve data collection methods and procedures. A copy of the individual interview questions is located in Appendix A. All interviews were audio-taped with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

Step 2: Demographic data questionnaire. In this study, characteristics of the participants were collected through a demographic questionnaire. LeTendre and Lipka (1996) reported the advantages of obtaining demographic data about participants and how these help the researcher to understand the descriptions provided by the participants. Sokolowoski (1999) contended demographic information allowed for capturing all the elements of an experience. Recording participant information such as age, gender, years of work experience, and prior occupations allowed for more breadth of knowledge concerning interviewees' experiences. A copy of the demographic data questionnaire is located in Appendix B.

Procedures

Permission was requested from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Sam Houston State University. A copy of the IRB approval letter to conduct my research is included in Appendix C. Following obtained permission from the IRB, I sought the assistance of the TSPRA President and Vice-President to identify communication directors in the Greater Houston area who were willing to participate in the study. This clustering sampling procedure allows a researcher to access names in a group or organization, obtain names of individuals within the cluster, and sample them (Creswell, 2014). E-mails were sent and personal phone calls were made to enlist participation.

Once participants were identified, I provided all participants with a complete description of the requirements of the study and the study's purpose. Informed consent

was acquired from each participant giving written assurance that participation was voluntary and that all identities would remain anonymous during the entirety of the research and the publication of the study's outcomes. Bogdan and Biklen (2006) suggested that for qualitative research, the participants should be informed of the purpose of the study, the time allotment for the study, how results will be reported, and what the participants can expect to gain from the study.

Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2013) concurred that multiple forms of data can be collected in phenomenological research, but the individual interview is most common. I conducted individual, face-to-face interviews with participants at their places of employment at a time that was convenient for the participant. Demographic questionnaires were provided at the conclusion of the individual interview. An open-ended question to elicit any further commentary from the participant were provided on the demographic questionnaire.

All interviews were audio-taped with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. No recording of personal information on digital files occurred. All digital files were stored in a private database available only to me and were accessible only with a passcode. The passcode was changed monthly for increased security. In addition, all audio recordings were stored on a hard drive that was passcode protected and only accessible to me. All data were encrypted.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) referenced a standard of trustworthiness as a process that must be evident in qualitative research study with terms such as credibility and transferability. Credibility references the confidence in the truth value or believability of

the study's findings (Sandelowski, 1986). Trustworthiness refers to how accurately the researcher interpreted the participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 1986). Creswell (2013) refers to trustworthiness as validation and provides eight validation strategies that aid in the assurance of obtaining accurate accounts of the data. I employed the following: (a) member checking, (b) bracketing, (c) thick description, (d) reflexive journaling, and (e) codebook and analytic memo writing. Creswell (2014) reported that by examining evidence from multiple sources, the "justification for themes" is established and adds validity to the study (p.201).

Member checking. Member checking or soliciting participants' viewpoints on the accuracy of interpretations and findings from the interview process was undertaken (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) stated that member checking is key to increasing trustworthiness in a qualitative study. After completing the face-to face interviews and transcribing the interview, I asked participants to review the transcripts for accuracy, referred to as formal member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Any corrections by the participants or additional information given was included in the transcript.

Bracketing. Bracketing denotes the researcher's acknowledgement of the possible influence of personal experiences in the collection and interpretation of data (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Van Manen (1990) suggested bracketing personal experiences is often difficult for the researcher because of the assumptions a researcher often brings to the data interpretations. I was self-aware of the bias I brought to the study because of my personal experiences as a public school communication director and I was transparent in reporting this bias in my results and conclusions.

Thick description. Subsequently, rich, thick description was written from the data collected so that readers can make decisions about my research's transferability across other settings or participants (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995). Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2007) discussed the importance of detailed, thick descriptions being provided so as to understand the phenomenon in question. This thick description helped in the process of determining when saturation of ideas or themes was been reached.

Reflexive Journaling. From the very beginning and throughout the study, I attempted to clarify researcher bias so that transparency was obtained by keeping a journal of case notes and observations throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Creswell (2014) and Glesne & Peshkin (1992), this self-reflection and transparency creates honesty in the narrative that will be beneficial to the reader. I included commentary about my personal experiences in the world of communications so that the reader may see how my background shaped the outcomes or themes asserted.

Codebook and analytic memo writing. Finally, I kept a codebook to assist me in the coding process. Saldaña (2013) suggested the use of a codebook to encourage a systematic and analytic process when reviewing the data analysis process and regrouping various categories into smaller or larger segments. By employing this management technique, I was able to keep my codes organized and fluid throughout the data analysis stage of research. Additionally, I engaged in analytic memo writing while coding to document and reflect on the entire coding process (Saldaña, 2013) and the relationships and meaning I gave to the data. Weston et al. (2001) noted that coding and analytic

memo writing were concurrent activities that allow for a better understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Data Analysis

For my study, various forms of data were collected. The information gleaned from the individual interviews was analyzed using first cycle and second cycle coding techniques. Saldaña (2013) defined coding as "a method that enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories of families because they share some characteristics" (p. 9). First cycles of descriptive coding where labels were assigned to data to summarize using a word or phrase were performed (Miles et al., 2014). Also, application of attribute coding and structural coding was utilized (Saldaña, 2013). In addition, In Vivo coding techniques were adopted so that participants' voices were captured and understanding of their experiences was deepened (Saldaña, 2013). Multiple rounds of first cycle coding occurred with no more than the recommended 30 to 40 codes being identified due to manageability (Saldaña, 2013).

Constant comparison analysis was used as the analysis approach so as to reach saturation of categories and identify the subcategories within each group (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Furthermore, constant comparison analysis was undertaken inductively so as to allow for codes to emerge from the collected data, in contrast to deductive constant comparison analysis where codes are developed before the analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

Next, the second cycle coding method of axial coding was used to develop a basic framework of generic relationships of the codes (Saldaña, 2013). Richards and Morse (2007) recognized the linking process of coding as crucial as the labeling of the codes. In

addition, selective coding helped me identify core categories and concepts from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using these coding methods as a guide, I identified issues and common themes among the experiences of the communication directors. A descriptive narrative allowed for the detailed reporting of the participants' experiences as communication directors in public education.

Summary

In Chapter III, the research design, participant selection, instruments, procedures, and data analysis techniques were detailed. I outlined the phenomenological approach undertaken in the study and provided insight into the data collection process and coding methods utilized. In the next chapter, the findings of the study are presented.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the various experiences of communication directors in Texas public school districts. Demographic characteristics of the participants are provided from the retrieval of data from the demographic questionnaire completed by each participant. Also in this chapter, findings from the analysis of six individual interviews with current Texas public school communication directors are discussed descriptively through themes and subthemes that emerged and are presented in tables. Recommendations from participants are offered, along with a cross-case analysis of the data.

Participants

A purposive sample of six participants who currently serve as public school communication directors was selected for face-to-face interviews. Both criterion and variation sampling strategies were used. Criteria required of each selected participant were (a) director-level position, (b) public school service, (c) a minimum of 3 years in the field of public school communications, and (d) membership in the Region 4 or Region 6 chapter of Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA). Variation sampling strategies were utilized by selecting participants from both genders, various ethnicities, and different-sized districts. Three participants were males and three participants were females. One of the females and two of the males were White. One of the males and one of the females were Black; one female was Hispanic. The participants served in six different districts ranging in population of approximately 8,700 students to almost 70,000

students. Pseudonyms (i.e., Michele, Tessa, Kathy, Andy, Matthew, and Chris) were given to each participant in my study to ensure confidentiality in the reporting of the data. The ages of the participants ranged from 37 -51 years and all participants obtained a minimum of a bachelor's degree at the postsecondary level. In addition, all participants possessed over 12 years of experience in public relations with four participants having 20 years of experience or more. The size of the district each participant served ranged from approximately 8,000 students to almost 70,000 students, and an average of 53 hours was worked weekly by the communication directors interviewed. Data collected from the demographic questionnaire are presented in Table 1 and Table 2. Specifically, Table 1 details personal demographic characteristics of each participant.

Table 1

Demographic Data Collected From Participants

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Highest Degree Earned	Public Relations Years	School PR Years
Michelle	Female	White	45	Bachelors	20	20
Tessa	Female	Hispanic	49	Masters	25	4
Kathy	Female	Black	37	Masters	12	7
Andy	Male	Hispanic	45	Masters	20	3
Matthew	Male	White	46	Bachelors	18	18
Chris	Male	White	51	Bachelors	25	25

Table 2 provides information about each participants' district and department size. In addition, participants were asked their opinions about work moral morale and work load.

Table 2

Professional Data Collected From Participants

Participant	Number of Students	Number of Campuses	Number of Department Personnel	Adequate Number of Personnel	Average Hours Worked Weekly	Work Morale
Michelle	8,738	14	1.5	No	50	Very positive
Tessa	37,000	37	11	Most of the time	55	Very positive
Kathy	8,900	15	1	Some of the time	40	Somewhat positive
Andy	69,700	7	9	Some of the time	60	Very positive
Matthew	9,600	13	2	Some of the time	45	Very positive
Chris	47,300	44	4	No	65	Very positive

Emergent Themes

Application of Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach and Saldana's (2013) coding techniques helped me identify themes. Several rounds of first-cycle coding resulted in five structural themes. These themes were *Preparation, Responsibilities, Expectations, Challenges,* and *Recommendations.* Along with numerous sub-themes, these themes expressed the experiences of public school communication directors in the 21st century. Specific statements from each participant were shared to provide insight into the world of the public school communication director. Furthermore, commonalities existed in the everyday experiences of the public relations professionals and were presented in detail to understand better the public relations professionals' roles

and challenges. A summary of the themes from the lived experiences of the six public school communication directors is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Operational Definitions Relating to Emergent Themes

Theme	Operational Definition
Preparation	Communication directors' actions that led to their decision to pursue a successful career in public schools.
Responsibilities	Tasks charged to the public school communication directors during a normal work schedule.
Expectations	Suppositions of the public school communication directors by various stakeholders in the district or community.
Challenges	Common day-to-day difficulties faced by public school communication directors.
Recommendations	Suggestions and advice provided by the public school communication directors to school districts and new communication directors for a successful career in public school public relations.

Preparation. In an effort to be effective in the position as a public school communication director, participants discussed various methods that laid the groundwork for their success. The theme of *Preparation* developed and the following sub-themes emerged: (a) Postsecondary Education, (b) Mentorships, and (c) Professional Affiliations. Agreement occurred among the participants about the various experiences that best readied them for their roles in public relations. Descriptions of each sub-theme are provided in Table 4.

Table 4

Description of Emergent Themes of Preparation of Public School Communication Directors

Preparation	Description	Significant Statement Example
Postsecondary Education	Attainment of postsecondary degrees with focus on communication skills	"I think at least you need to have a master's degree. I do think it needs to be communication related….there's an art and study of communications."
Mentorships	Relationships with seasoned public relations professionals in public education	"He [superintendent] told me to reach out to other local school PR professionals….so I befriended two really awesome PR people. That's when I realized how helpful people in this field were."
Professional Affiliations	Participation in public relations business organizations and trainings	"I love NSPRA and TSPRA. The resources they have are phenomenal and they're all really creative talented people."

Postsecondary Education. One sub-theme that developed under the theme of *Preparation* was Postsecondary Education and the need for advanced education after high school graduation. All six participants earned postsecondary degrees with three of the six participants obtaining a master's degree in a field related to communications. Kathy shared, "I have a bachelor's in mass communications with an emphasis in broadcast journalism. Then I have my master's in mass communications and journalism also." The importance of pursuing a formal education in the field of communication was acknowledged as beneficial to their success. Tessa added, "I would encourage higher education because of the formation it provides."

Mentorships. Another sub-theme evident in *Preparation* for the role of a public school communication director was Mentorships. The participants discussed the importance of guidance they received from seasoned professionals in the field and the invaluable lessons learned from relationships they built with other communication directors. Chris reflected, "I got to learn from the best. I just picked her [experienced co-worker in communication department] brain. I mean, I was like her shadow……probably followed her to the coffee bar back and forth." Andy reiterated the importance of the mentor relationship because of the fellowship it provided. He said, "I just think that there's only people that work in public relations and education that understand each other." This need to learn and grow from experienced people in the field of school PR was expressed repeatedly in the interviews.

Professional Affiliations. A common sub-theme of *Preparation* was Professional Affiliations. The participants discussed the importance of membership in various organizations that serve and support the public school public relations professional. Every participant mentioned membership in TSPRA as an asset in the growth and development in their careers. Chris commented, "TSPRA has just been such a valuable resource…I'm going to probably say TSPRA a hundred times." In addition, continual professional development was mentioned as the way to stay current on developments and movements in the communications field and gain an understanding and knowledge of the wide scope of issues involved in school public relations. Michele added, "I stay on top of trends through TSPRA and NSPRA. My principal encouraged me to get involved in TSPRA and I've never missed a conference." Tessa concurred about the value of professional trainings and developments for her and her team in the following statement:

> We plan and we budget and we are really good about going to NSPRA and TSPRA [conferences]. We never go to the same sessions. We split up and then come back and debrief. This is about learning. Let's absorb as much as we can. We also pick a conference to go to together every year that's outside of education . . . to learn and to grow.

Responsibilities. The second theme, *Responsibilities,* emerged when discussing the experiences of the public school communication directors. Many of the public relations professionals performed common tasks on a day-to-day basis and maintained similar weekly duties and monthly commitments. *Responsibilities* are presented in the following sub-themes: (a) Superintendent's Cabinet (b) Media Spokesperson, (c) Community Affiliations, (d) Campus-Student Recognition, and (e) Crisis Management. Descriptions of each sub-theme are provided in Table 5.

Table 5

Description of Emergent Themes of Responsibilities of Public School Communication Directors

Responsibilities	Description	Significant Statement Examples
Superintendent's Cabinet	Membership and participation on the superintendent's inner team in charge of strategic planning and facilitating of district activities	"I'm responsible to take information to the superintendent. I have a day [weekly] that's committed to her where I go in for an hour and talk about different projects. We also have a cabinet meeting weekly."

(continued)

Responsibilities	Description	Significant Statement Examples
Media Spokesperson	Contact for media inquiries and the pitch person for news stories and district coverage to media	"I have an open-door policy with the media. They'll call or text . . . anytime they call, if it's something I can answer, I answer. If not, I'll say 'give me like 10 minutes'."
Community Affiliations	Membership or relationships on community boards, organizations, including school board	"There are several standing committee meetings I attend. We're very conscious of our neighborhoods and communities we represent."
Campus-Student Recognition	Coverage of campus events and student honors/awards	"My favorite role is photographer because I get to go to all the schools and take photos of fun things and smiling kids."
Crisis Management	Coordination of all stakeholders in times of crisis	"I meet a lot with the Cabinet, but crisis can come about and everything else can be pushed to the side."

Superintendent's Cabinet. Membership in the superintendent's cabinet was a commonality that existed among all the participants and developed as a sub-theme of *Responsibilities*. Tessa discussed the importance of cabinet meetings toward preparation for the week's duties. "I meet with a lot of our Cabinet members and folks to prep them for our meetings and for our presentations." Participation within this district leadership team was stressed as integral to the success of the communication director. Keeping informed of events and the district's positioning on topics and happenings was seen as key to effectiveness in the role. Kathy also met daily with her superintendent to "see if there's anything that he needs me to do or anything that's pertinent. I also like to run by him things I have on my calendar or things I'm thinking we probably need to do."

Furthermore, the confidential and trusting relationship between the superintendent and communication director was repeatedly acknowledged. Matt commented on the importance of being a counsel for the superintendent and allowing the superintendent to "just shut the door and talk, knowing that they have that level of trust with you." Andy recognized his role in the cabinet as "keeping her [superintendent] informed of what's going on with community folks. Making that connection before something explodes or before anything like that happens."

Media Spokesperson. Another sub-theme that arose within *Responsibilities* was the communication director's role of media spokesperson for the school district. All of the participants served in the capacity as the media contact and liaison for their districts. Chris noted the time he spends working with the media and the business contacts for that [relationship]. He pointed out, "A lot of planning and prep work goes into it….I'm often pitching the media……trying to get [an event] on TV." Andy described the process of crafting correspondences with the media and the difficulty of "formalizing what we are going to say, how we are going to say it, and making sure the superintendent is comfortable with what's being said." Matt provided the following advice about the role of media spokesperson:

> When it involves the media or something, it's nothing you can really control, but you have to tell them what they need to hear. Don't tell them what they want to hear. It's not going to be pleasant, but better that they're informed and we make a plan for damage control or what have you."

Kathy summed up her role as the media spokesperson by saying, "You have to be able to talk to everybody; you have to be comfortable in doing so. You have to be willing to know that you're probably going to wear flats more than heels."

Community Affiliations. Community Affiliations was another sub-theme that developed within the theme of *Responsibilities.* Participants noted the various boards they served on and the different groups of community stakeholders to whom they provided school district representation. Chris mentioned being the primary contact between the school board and also serving on local management districts in the community's business arenas. He said, "I've been on the Rotary Board; I've been on the Chamber of Commerce Board, and I run the superintendent's pastoral network." Tessa agreed, "I sit on a couple of boards in the community which is nice." Representation of the district in the community was seen as a major responsibility of the communication director position and was welcomed as a bridge-building role between district and community goals.

Campus-Student Recognition. Within the theme of *Responsibilities,* the sub-theme of Campus-Student Recognition advanced from the participants' responses. Matt noted routine campus events were integral responsibilities of the school public relations person. "Your special award things, different performances from the fine arts, regional band contests . . ., [these events] will get away from you if you don't get them on your calendar." Kathy expressed her enjoyment of covering campus events and going into the schools. "It's really heartwarming to see them [the little kids]. They always perk up when they see the camera." Chris agreed, "I love seeing the little kids and reading to the kindergarteners . . . seeing a kid's face when he or she realized they're meeting the

person who got them on TV or put them on Twitter. All of the participants welcomed the responsibility of Recognition and lamented the lack of time to cover every event and student award recognition.

Crisis Management. Finally, Crisis Management was a universal sub-theme that evolved from all of the participants' responses in regards to *Responsibilities.* Each of the communication directors was a lead member on the district's crisis management team and held distinct duties during times of emergency. Matt commented about his role during a crisis with the following:

> In times of crisis, we want to make sure we're communicating what we need to communicate to parents to make sure they're clearly informed of issues going on, that they don't feel slighted. Because, if they see something in a news report, sometimes they'll take it as gospel.

Chris clarified his role during crisis management further by acknowledging his supporting role of campus principals and how he strives to help relieve the pressures placed on administration during emergency situations. He added:

> By no means, crisis management isn't an everyday thing, but to know that they [principals] have somebody they can trust during a crisis is imperative. I said [to principals], look, first of all, let's get something clear. I couldn't do your job. I couldn't teach kids all day long every day. I couldn't be a principal. But what I can do, and I'm good at it, is keeping these people [media] out there from coming into this school and disrupting your day.

Expectations. A third theme that emerged from the public school communication directors' interviews were the commonalities of expectations of the district's public

relations professionals from the various stakeholders within the district and the community. *Expectations* are presented as the following sub-themes: (a) Messaging, (b) Information, (c) Relationships, and (d) Varied Communications. Descriptions of each sub-theme are provided in Table 6.

Table 6

Description of Emergent Themes of Expectations of Public School Communication Directors

Expectations	Description	Significant Statement Examples
Messaging	Promoting alignment of district vision and initiatives	"The volume that we have to write and communicate in any school district is just really quick. It's intensive so you have to be a strong writer and you have to understand messaging as a synced message."
Information	Providing timely, truthful, and understandable information to all stakeholders	"Continue to put out not just positive news but making sure we're the first ones to put the news out instead of somebody else doing it for us."
Relationships	Building connections with various stakeholders	"If they [stakeholders] come to us, and they see us as a partner, we can mitigate . . . keep a lot of issues from escalating. They need to see us as a partner and that we're here to help."
Varied Communications	Using multiple modes and methods of information dissemination	"Trying to get as much information out as many different ways as possible to the people who need it. The Web is a great tool, but it's not the only tool. Social media is a great tool, but again, it's not the only tool."

Messaging. One sub-theme that emerged from *Expectations* was the expectancy of district communication directors to provide a unified vision and branding of the district's goals. During the interviews, all of the participants mentioned the importance of capturing and expressing the voice of the superintendent and board of trustees to the various stakeholders. Chris said, "He [superintendent] knows I have my own opinions, but on camera, in public, it's [district name]. I'm to represent him [superintendent] and district in a professional and poised manner. Matt acknowledged the significance of providing a united front by the following remarks:

> We all speak with one voice, especially in times of when we're facing an issue, whether it be a crisis situation or talking about new facilities. We all speak with that same shared voice. We all want to be on the same page. Of course, you're doing it on the fly because usually it's a statement. You're either writing a letter out to parents or something, so we all make sure we have that one-voice theory . . . a lot of collaboration.

Tessa also remarked on providing a unified voice for the district, "I'm always pushing good writing . . . everything on good copy . . . words are powerful."

Information. Another sub-theme of *Expectations* was the need for accurate and timely information to be disseminated by public school public relations professionals to numerous audiences. Michele commented, "Principals expect me to communicate positive and informational news to their parents. They expect me to provide support to them and their campus during crisis." Informational support was also detailed by Matt in the following:

> Just being there as that support system for them and being that service and support for their campus . . . communicating the good things that they're doing and about their programs . . . sharing information with parents. School communicators have to communicate clearly with the public and back it up with facts.

Chris agreed that parents want information accurately and quickly. He said, "So when something good happens, I tell them first, before I blast it out to the media, and when something bad comes their way, I tell them too." Tessa expressed the same sentiment about telling the district's story first. "They [parents] do not want to hear anything on the news before as a District we've communicated it [to them]. You must get out in front of it [the story]." Matt concluded, "They [district officials] like for us to highlight as many kids and schools as possible, but the thing with parents, in addition to those stories, we always want to make them feel like they are informed.

Relationships. All of the participants stressed the importance of networking within the district and within the community. Relationships developed as a sub-theme of *Expectations* and the need to build associations with multiple publics and stakeholders. Matt recognized, "Principals need to know that I'm going to be there for them, in good or in bad times . . . it's part of the relationship building process." Craig agreed about the significance of fostering relationships. He concurred, "I try to cross that bridge with as much face-to-face as I can get out. That's why I've got a standing offer to speak at Rotary. Just anytime . . . give me 10 or 15 minutes." Andy also acknowledged stakeholders' need to have somebody they can communicate with and somebody who's going to be honest with them. He stated, "You kind of have to get to know each one of them [stakeholders]. Speak to them in a language they can understand." Taking the time

to build connections with all of the various stakeholders inside and outside of the district was seen as invaluable to the communicator director's effectiveness.

Varied Communications. In the 21st century, a multitude of modes of communication are available to all stakeholders. Within the theme of *Expectations,* Varied Communications arose as a sub-theme as participants discussed the need to connect with the many different publics (i.e., administration, teachers, parents, students, community members, and legislative personnel). Matt remarked, "We have to use all modes of communication with them [parents]. It's just a must, because that's really the most important audience right there is the public or parents of these kiddos." Tessa spoke about the need to target the information to the identified audiences utilizing specific modes of communication. She said, "Parents want us to tailor information and not just do mass public education communications." This need to be intentional in the messaging and in the information dissemination was also expressed Andy when he noted the importance of utilizing a variety of methods of communication in the following statement:

> If you're going to communicate, you need to be able to communicate with the folks in a way that they'll understand and be able notice, 'okay, are they understanding what you're saying or not?' I think we need to understand that there's that [social media] form, and that platform is going to be evolving, but it's a great way to communicate and it's a great way to reach out . . . to get more interaction.

Challenges. The public school communication directors admitted their positions held various challenges. Within the theme of *Challenges,* the following sub-themes were

distinct: (a) Lack of Control, (b) Resource Limitations, (c) Work/Life Balance, and (d) Evolution of Job. Descriptions of each sub-theme are provided in Table 7.

Table 7

Description of Emergent Themes of Challenges of Public School Communication Directors

Challenges	Description	Significant Statement Examples
Lack of Control	Unpredictability of job due to crisis and social media management	"Even with the best of intentions, day-to-day things of putting out fires prevent me from getting everything done that I would like to."
Resource Limitations	Lack of personnel allocations in the communication department and budgetary constraints	"Definitely with school funding being a moving target like it is . . .we have to prioritize. Budget can sometimes limit what you do. You've got to do more with less."
Work/Life Balance	Job is often 24 hours a day/7 days a week/ 365 days per year	"Balancing work life and home life is a big challenge because it's hard to get away. I think because of the volume of activity that comes through any and even small school district's communication departments. It's just 24/7/365."
Evolution of Job	Channels of communication continue to develop and require ever-changing methods to reach stakeholders	"The speed that things are changing in communications. I mean, just in the last five years, we've seen incredible changes. If you go back a decade, I mean, social media and the volume of that and how we have to be in front of it is really changing the dynamics."

Lack of Control. The communication directors described the nature of their work as quite unpredictable. When asked to describe a typical day in their lives, each one responded with a resounding, "There is no typical day!" Melissa expressed her answer in the following response:

> There are no typical days as a communications director! One phone call from the media can have all my daily plans go out the window. Social media can get out of control so quickly. People can post whatever they want and it can spread like wildfire.

Though the participants discussed a weekly schedule they try to follow, they acknowledged things occurred that they could not have foreseen. Andy agreed, "There is no typical day. You don't have control over stuff that happens . . . stuff that you can't control and then you wish you could." Chris described his experience this way:

> You're pulled in a lot of directions each and every day. You may come in thinking, oh, my first call is to [name], my second call is to [name] . . . and then bang, you have a bus wreck.

The unpredictability of any given day was accepted as the norm for the position by all the participants.

Resource Limitations. In addition to the lack of control in their roles, the communication directors discussed the challenges of working with less resources than they would ultimately like. Resource Limitations arose as a sub-theme within *Challenges.* Kathy lamented, "Working just with a department of one . . . it's hard. They [school boards] have an uncanny knack of looking at other districts and thinking we are supposed to have that too." Furthermore, she experienced a disconnect with the Board

of Trustees and their expectations of her position when she only had the resources of one person to cover all communication experiences for a district of over 8,000 students. Melissa also worked within a one-person department and expressed the desire and need for more help. She stated, "If I had a full-time person that could take over some of my duties, I could be more proactive and strategic with planning communication efforts." Though Tessa's department consisted of 11 people in a large district, she suggested the following when dealing with resource and budget constraints:

> I think in general for communications, everybody needs to move to a generalist model, meaning that everybody needs to kind of be able to do a little bit of everything because we're too small, even for a size of district like this. We're getting ready to come up to a very tough budget environment, but you can't cut certain roles.

Work/Life Balance. Another sub-theme of *Challenges* noted in the responses of the school communication directors was Work/Life Balance. The participants affirmed the combination of unpredictability in the role and the lack of resources created a struggle for the participants to often maintain an equilibrium between home and work responsibilities. Chris described it like this:

> We had something last week, and my phone was ringing 8:30 . . . 9:00 o'clock at night. My girlfriend was like, 'Don't they realize you're not at work?' I said, 'Well, sweetie, sorry, but I'm really not ever not at work.'" Kathy also acknowledged the stress of "always having to be on" and said, "It's like being a pseudo-celebrity. It's a hard thing because it's hard to turn off. It's an all-day, every day thing. I always have to be available.

Andy mentioned the same challenges of "always having to be on" in the following:

> Balancing work life and home life is a big challenge because it's hard to get away. Every day, I spend two hours answering emails. I think because of the volume of activity that comes through even small school districts' communication departments, it's just 24/7/365. At some point, if our quality of life or the family life is being affected, then no job is worth it. There has to be a balance. Otherwise, you're going crazy.

Evolution of Job. As the participants discussed the experiences faced in their roles, Evolution of Job developed as a sub-theme of *Challenges.* The communication directors noted the hurdles they faced to keep up with an ever-changing environment of information dissemination and audience expectations and requests. Tessa reflected, "If we're going to tell the story of the district, we need to understand the things that are impacting education in general. She noted the need to "constantly be trying to improve." Andy discussed the same sentiments:

> You need to give people who are creative the space to be creative and not just say this is how we do it, this is how we did it last year, and this is how we did it 20 years ago. There's an opportunity to produce more content. That's why I'm bringing in the social media platform person. Facebook is probably here for the long haul, maybe, but what if we're not keeping up with, like I said, with what the 21 year-olds . . . parents that have kids in the system now? What if that's not what they're using anymore? We're over here thinking, oh, we're on Facebook, great!

> We need to be very aware of what's going on. In that respect, I think the creativity part is needed. We need to think beyond stuff.

Chris agreed the world of communications is fluid in public schools. "We must use the communication channels our parents and students use." The ever-changing landscape of social media creates challenges to make certain communication directors are getting their messages out to their audiences.

Recommendations. The last theme that emerged from the interviews was *Recommendations.* The participants shared many of the same suggestions to school districts to better support the efforts of public school communication directors. In addition, advice was also provided to new public school communication personnel. Agreement occurred among the participants about the various experiences that best prepared them for their roles in public relations. These recommendations are presented as the following sub-themes: (a) Mentorships, (b) Relationships, (c) Cabinet Membership, and (d) Authorship. Descriptions of each sub-theme are provided in Table 8.

Table 8

Description of Emergent Themes of Recommendations for Public School Communication Directors

Recommendations	Description	Significant Statement Examples
Mentorships	Develop a network of professional seasoned colleagues for support and guidance	"New directors should find a colleague they can go to for questions, concerns, and advice. Get involved with TSPRA because the organization is a wealth of knowledge and networking."

(continued)

Recommendations	Description	Significant Statement Examples
Relationships	Build associations with all stakeholders inside and outside of the district	"You've got to build relationships. You've got to build trust with the people, and you've got to be in the meetings. That's the biggest thing for new communication (directors); you've got to build that."
Cabinet Membership	Collaborate weekly with superintendent's inner team	"Keep them in the loop of happenings. Don't have them be on a need-to-know basis. They really have a way of seeing the big picture and can help see things from all angles beforehand and help eliminate drama before it even gets started."
Authorship	Possess ability to write grammatically correct with tone/voice/audience in mind	"I wouldn't hire anybody in communications that cannot write. I think, if you can write, you can do the other stuff."

Mentorships. Recommendations from all participants included finding mentors to learn from and use as resources. The importance of "not recreating the wheel" and "pulling from other professional's experiences" was a common acknowledgment of all the communication directors. Chris pointed out, "We have to educate them [new school district communication directors] to the way we do things. Sometimes things can move a little slower in a school district than they do the corporate world." In addition, all of the participants stressed joining TSPRA and networking with other public relations people in education. Melissa recognized TSPRA as "an invaluable resource for me."

Relationships. Another sub-theme of *Recommendations* was Relationships and the significance of spending time building connections within the school district's

departments, campuses, and community. Chris advised new directors to "get involved and visit every school as often as you can." He suggested, "Go to your Chamber, go to your Rotary, even your local representatives. I've learned a lot just meeting with them and learning what they're looking for from this position." Chris also noted "always having something positive to say about your district" when you are meeting people. He noted never missing an opportunity to "spread the good word and your smiling face." In addition, Andy discussed the benefits of taking time with others in the school with the following remarks:

> Spend more time with other employees getting to know them. You never know, you may need to go back to that person. "Hey, you remember you told me whatever", and there you go, the job gets done. Time you spend building connections pays off.

Relationship building with media personnel was mentioned specifically by participants. Tessa advised, "Make sure that you talk to the media because they have to know who you are and are familiar with you. You have to understand exactly how they work." The time spent interacting with media was seen as time well spent for both positive and negative circumstances within the district.

Cabinet Membership. Membership in the cabinet was seen as crucial to the effectiveness of the communication director's role. "The public relations department cannot be a totally separate thing," said Tessa. She expressed her recommendation for districts in the following statement:

> We have to make sure people understand the value we bring to the district.

> They [communication directors] need to be at the table in the Cabinet. They have to be at the table. I don't think you can have an effective Communications Head that's not in the strategic meetings. You cannot have them as a subgroup under the HR….way down. They have to be hearing what's going on to know how to position things. I need to have all the information. I'm not going to tell the media all the information. I'm not going to tell what happened in the closet, but I need to know that something happened in the closet. Superintendent sets the tone for that.

Tessa agreed, "We have to know what's going on inside and out. If it's a dictatorship, there's not a true way to be able to communicate."

Authorship. The final recommendation for school districts and for communication directors was development and perfection of writing skills. This sub-theme emerged as Authorship. Each participant discussed the necessity for communication directors to write exceptionally well and do it quickly. Tessa remarked, "People are generally way too slow in education. You better get something out . . . even if it's not perfect." She also stated "I'd never hire anyone that couldn't write." This ability to effectively communicate quickly, accurately, and effectively for a variety of audiences was stressed as key to public school public relations professionals' success. Kathy expressed simply, "You have to be able to write."

Recommendations from Participants

Based on the findings from my study, there are recommendations for practice that could aid the public school communication directors in their positions. I asked the participants what recommendations they would share with school districts for supporting communication directors and what advice they might share with a new communication

director. In addition, I inquired how they felt their position could be more effective in helping to meet district goals.

Suggestions for improved practices evolved from the interviews as the participants discussed areas where they could have utilized more support in the challenges they faced. More specifically, these recommendations can be directed towards the public relations professional and preparation programs, the school districts employing public relations personnel, and the professional organizations that support public school communication specialists.

First, participants' recommendations were directed toward preparation programs for public relations personnel. Each of the participants in my study began their careers in the private sector of public relations and held some type of postsecondary degree in either journalism or communications and were later recruited to join the communication teams of a public independent school district. The school communication specialists were quick to acknowledge the importance of a strong journalism background as key to being successful in their education careers. The amount of information that must be written and disseminated to the various audiences, along with the pressures of time and the immediacy of information desired, required the public relations professionals to possess strong writing skills and the ability to perform under pressure. All of the participants mentioned the importance of being able to write clearly for the intended audience, being able to produce copy quickly and accurately, and being able to persuasively provide information without blatant biases being evident. Participants recommended preparation programs continue to adapt writing curriculum to include instruction in strong grammar skills, audience recognition, and writing for various mediums such as news releases,

promotions, and the different social media formats. Furthermore, suggestions were also made to require internships within preparation programs so that novice school communication specialists would actually possess real world experience before their first position.

Second, my study's participants provided suggestions to the school districts who employ public relations personnel about how they could support the position to realize its full potential for the district. A unanimous recommendation was to provide opportunities for mentorships to communication directors. This suggestion was relevant to the novice professional as well as the seasoned veteran. All public relations professionals, no matter their years of service, were viewed as benefiting from the relationship of another public relations professional. Modifications in practice and the ever-evolving variety of communication modes available to public relations personnel made mentoring relationships a much needed component of support. Furthermore, propositions were provided to foster these mentorships between the education and business sectors. Tessa noted the importance for her team to learn from the business sector and consciously chose to include professional development from outside the realm of education. In addition, multiple recommendations from all participants listed the necessity of including the communication director within the superintendent's cabinet. Membership of the public relations professional within the cabinet and strategic leadership team was viewed as necessary to maximize the position's fullest potential.

Third, participants recognized the importance of professional organization membership for public school communication directors. A professional network of like-minded individuals to provide guidance, standards, and support was an invaluable

resource for the public relations specialists. Recommendations were given to continue with up-to-date trainings, conferences, and seminars for all levels of communication personnel. Membership and participation in organizations such as the Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) was paramount to the success of the participants.

Cross-Case Analysis

Miles and Huberman (1994) discussed one of purposes of a cross-case analysis was to enhance the generalizability of findings and increase the transferability to other contexts. Another purpose was to deepen the examination or exploration of the data. Miles and Huberman (1994) cautioned overgeneralizing the inferences made by the researchers to application to single cases. By looking at multiple cases, researchers might form more general categories about the connections and relationships between various conditions. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested matrices as one format to display data so that patterns and themes be observed. I created multiple matrices from the individual interviews and demographic questionnaire to ascertain if patterns existed.

After analyzing the data collected from the individual interviews, I constructed various matrices to review the themes and subthemes within participants' responses and looked for patterns within gender, age, and ethnicity. Interestingly, no prominent patterns existed based on any of these three variables. Connections or generalizations could not be drawn from the data based on gender, age, or ethnicity. A larger sample or more specific questions related to these variables might yield different results.

Subsequently, I created a matrix to display responses from the demographic questionnaire completed by participants. Patterns of responses were evident within this data. Table 9 illustrates a cross-case analysis of these responses.

One of the questions from the demographic questionnaire was, "How many hours do you work each week?" Five out of the six participants responded they worked more than 40 hours each week with three of the participants working more than 50 hours each week. Many of the participants mentioned work/life balance was a challenge for them, and the lack of control they experienced in various crisis and social media situations were stressors in their professional and personal lives. Chris and Kathy vocalized the sentiment of always being "on call" and not really having control over any given day.

The participants were also asked if they thought the size of their department was adequate. As shown in Table 9, only two of the six participants believed enough personnel were allocated most of the time to the public school communication department. None of the participants answered "all of the time" to the question. The majority of responses uncovered participants' views of inadequate resources provided and insufficient personnel assigned to communications. Michelle remarked having another person in her department would allow for her "to be proactive and strategic with planning communication efforts." Matthew mentioned numerous times during his interview the strains of creating a good product without adequate resources and the importance of providing adequate funding to the communication department.

When asked to describe the general work morale of the department, the school public relations professionals unanimously offered positive responses. Five of the six participants gave the response of "very positive". Only one participant gave a different answer of "somewhat positive". Though all of the participants shared comments about struggles with a work/life balance and a lack of resources within the department, the

overall positive outlooks toward their professional careers were not affected by these challenges.

A final question asked on the demographic questionnaire was "Would you become a communication director again?" All six participants answered "strongly agree". Therefore, the long work hours, inadequate personnel resources allocated to the department, lack of control, and work/life balance did not negatively affect the morale of the communication directors. Further, these conditions did not alter their mindset about their career choice. All participants concurred they enjoyed their job and would choose the profession again.

Table 9

Partially Ordered Meta-Matrix: Selected Responses from Demographic Questionnaire

Participant	How many hours do you work each week?	Is department size adequate?	Describe general work morale.	Would you become a communication director again?
Kathy	40	Some of the time	Somewhat positive	Strongly agree
Matthew	45	Some of the time	Very positive	Strongly agree
Michelle	50	Not much of the time	Very positive	Strongly agree
Tessa	55	Most of the time	Very positive	Strongly agree
Andy	60	Most of the time	Very positive	Strongly agree
Chris	65	Not much of the time	Very positive	Strongly agree

Moustakas' Synthesis of Meaning

Moustakas (1994) maintained a synthesis of meaning or the essences of an experience could be determined by intuitively and reflectively integrating the descriptions provided by participants. In summary, the Texas public school communication director in the 21st century has evolved from the district's newsletter composer to a prominent leadership role in the superintendent's cabinet. Public school communication directors hold a variety of roles within the organization that included strategic leader, promotion specialist, and liaison for all stakeholders.

As a strategic leader within the superintendent's cabinet, the public school communication director maintained a finger on the pulse of the school community and the outside community. Communication directors provided advisement and input to the cabinet about the implications of various decisions based on their knowledge due to connections within these communities. In addition, often due to the direct line of report to the superintendent and the information shared, the communication director was a confidant and trusted partner to the superintendent.

The school public relations professional was a promotion specialist for the district. By utilizing all the modes of communication available to the district, this person was able to support district initiatives and help advance district goals. By being an advocate for the district in all of their promotions, the communication director helped foster a positive image for the district.

Finally, the school public relations professional was the liaison to all stakeholders within the district. Whether this liaison function was in a crisis management role or membership in various organizations, this position provided a connection for individuals

and groups to the school district. The communication director was viewed as the link that joined the district's mission to stakeholder resources and helped build those relationships benefitting both parties.

Summary

In Chapter IV, participants' selection was discussed and demographic questionnaire findings were presented. Five emergent themes were detailed with multiple subthemes presented. In the last chapter, I will discuss the findings in relation to the research question and literature presented. Recommendations for future research and practice will also be detailed.

CHAPTER V

Discussion and Recommendations

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the various experiences of communication directors in Texas public schools districts in the 21st century. As detailed in Chapters III and IV, I collected data in face-to-face interviews from six participants who currently serve as Texas public school communication directors. Themes emerged from the analysis of the data that revealed commonalities in the participants' experiences of *Preparation, Responsibilities, Expectations, Challenges,* and *Recommendations* related to the experiences of communication directors.

As a current Texas public school communication professional, I have a personal interest in the field. I wanted to examine the experiences of other communication directors in the hopes that valuable information could be shared with educational leaders about the roles and challenges of the position. In addition, by revealing the challenges, improved implementation of practices could be determined. Better procedures and policies surrounding the responsibilities and expectations of the public relations professional might become evident. Finally, I hoped to provide recommendations for improved recruiting, hiring, and training standards for the PR professional of a public school setting, thereby, ultimately serving the best interests of the community and students.

In Chapter V, I will discuss my findings. I will provide a discussion of findings in relation to the research question presented, to the context of the literature review, and to

the conceptual framework. In addition, I will provide recommendations for future research and practice.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Research Question

One overarching question guided my study: What are the experiences of communication directors in Texas public school districts in the 21st century? The Texas public school communication director in the 21st century has evolved from the district's newsletter composer to a prominent leadership role in the superintendent's cabinet. Public school communication directors hold a variety of roles within the organization that included strategic leader, promotion specialist, and liaison for all stakeholders.

As a strategic leader within the superintendent's cabinet, the public school communication director maintained a finger on the pulse of the school community and the outside community. Communication directors provided advisement and input to the cabinet about the implications of various decisions based on their knowledge due to connections within these communities. In addition, often due to the direct line of report to the superintendent and the information shared, the communication director was a confidant and trusted partner to the superintendent.

The school public relations professional was a promotion specialist for the district. By utilizing all the modes of communication available to the district, this person was able to support district initiatives and help advance district goals. By being an advocate for the district in all of their promotions, the communication director helped foster a positive image for the district.

Finally, the school public relations professional was the liaison to all stakeholders within the district. Whether this liaison function was in a crisis management role or

membership in various organizations, this position provided a connection for individuals and groups to the school district. The communication director was viewed as the link that joined the district's mission to stakeholder resources and helped build those relationships benefitting both parties.

Discussion of Findings in the Context of the Literature Review

In this section, I will discuss the findings of my study in the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter II.

History of the public relations position and public schools. The establishment of the Publicity Bureau in 1900 cemented public relations as a profession (Crable & Vibbert, 1986). College courses and textbooks about public relations educated students about new career paths to be traveled from business and journalism fields and public relations career choices continued to grow. Within the context of my study, all of the communication directors interviewed started in the field of journalism and earned their bachelor's degrees from a business college with some focus in journalism and communications. The theme, *Preparation,* revealed the importance the participants placed on having a strong academic public relations background before entering into practice.

Though public school service was not the participants' initial career motivation, growth in the public school communications field and the opportunities for advancement and utilization of their skill sets made it an attractive career choice. History of school public relations professionals revealed increased expectations as social media exploded and superintendents relied more heavily on the services of their communication specialists to meet demands of stakeholders (Bagin et al., 2008). A subtheme of

Superintendent's Cabinet within the theme of *Responsibilities* highlighted that all of the public relations specialists in my study had a direct line of report to their superintendent within the administration organizational chart. Each participant held a seat in the superintendent's cabinet and occupied a prominent position within the leadership team.

Another connection drawn to the historical literature of the profession and current practice was the participants' membership in professional organizations and the value they placed on these organizations. Various public relations trade organizations (i.e., NSPRA in 1935, PRSA in 1947, TSPRA in 1962, and IABC in 1970) recruited and supported candidates in the PR field and the field's prominence in business industry continued to expand. Within the *Preparation* theme, the subtheme of Professional Affiliations recognized the importance of the professional organizations to all of my study's participants. Each communication director held membership in multiple organizations and noted the necessity of networking and growing through these mentorships and educational opportunities.

Public relations practitioner roles. As a review of the research on the topic of the public relations practitioner was conducted, the evolution of the position's roles became evident. Wilcox et al. (1992) assertion that public relations professionals concentrated on deliberate and planned actions shaped by policy has evolved into a much more layered definition of duties by other researchers. For example, Kowalski (2011) purported today's communication specialists be able to multi-task to satisfy an array of functions and provide support and information to a variety of audiences. Findings of my study provided evidence to support this wide range of roles and responsibilities for the school district communication director. Subthemes within the themes of *Responsibilities,*

Expectations, and *Challenges* detailed the various roles held by the public relations professional within district relations, community relations, and crisis/conflict management.

District relations. Participants in my study detailed the time they spent building relationships within the internal publics of the schools as a major role of their position. Within the context of the theme, *Preparation*, the subtheme, Mentorships, was noted by all the communication directors as fundamental to the growth and learning in their careers. These relationships continually influenced the communication directors' actions and developing philosophies. In addition, relationships were also highlighted repeatedly within conversations about the participants' duties. The theme, *Responsibilities*, generated a subtheme of Campus-Student Recognition. Many participants noted how facilitating connections at the campus level helped the communication director to better understand the needs of the campuses and departments and therefore, provide more up-to-date, correct information to all audiences. Trust was more easily attained when a relationship had been cultivated. Finally, the communication professionals' responses to questions about the demands of their position led to the theme of *Expectations.* One subtheme within *Expectations* was specifically categorized as Relationships due to the participants' perceptions their role was to foster rapport with many different groups of stakeholders.

Community relations. Within the theme of *Responsibilities,* Community Affiliations arose as a subtheme. All participants in the study served on a variety of community committees and reported district news and information to community organizations. In addition, all of the school public relations professionals held the title of

the district's media spokesperson and were responsible for answering all press requests and communicating with the superintendent any media activity. Johnston's et al. (2002) acknowledgement of the roles school public relations personnel play in school-community relationships were identified within the participants' responses (i.e., community organization participant, school/community liaison, and media relations spokesperson). Lack of resources and the job's 24/7 time commitment kept participants from being more active in their community liaison roles and this conclusion concurred with findings of Dodd et al. (2015).

Crisis/conflict management. Consensus was reached by participants about their role as the crisis manager. When conflict arose, the school public relations managers had vital parts and responsibilities to carry out before, during, and after the dilemma. Each of the participants noted crisis/conflict management was their least favorite part of their position and no matter how well prepared they thought they were, there was always something unplanned that could occur. This notion of unpredictability became a subtheme of Lack of Control within *Challenges.* In addition, the participants' responses supported research reported by Moore (2009). The necessity of quick, reliable information dissemination to the school's stakeholders was a major role fulfilled by the public school communication director, especially in times of crisis/conflict management.

In summary, my study's findings about the roles of the PR practitioner and the literature elevated relationship-building as a focal responsibility where much time and effort was spent. Spanning 30 years in their research, Norris (1984) claimed that public relations would be better understood if referred to as public relationships and Vieira and Grantham's (2015) identification of a relationship component in the numerous roles

served by the communication director paralleled the participants' acknowledgement of the importance of spending time making connections with people. Three of the four subthemes of *Recommendations* possessed components of making connections with others and important in the role of the communication director. Mentorships, Relationships, and Cabinet Membership each championed the benefits derived from spending time engaged with others. Building relationships with all stakeholders was viewed by all of the study's participants as integral to the role they played in supporting their districts and necessary for their success and goal attainment.

Public relations standards within public schools. As I researched the various guidelines followed by school communication directors, two sets of standards were prominent. The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2015) in October 2015 was one set of standards. In addition, another set of standards was the criteria developed by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA, 2002) for public schools to consider when developing a public relations program.

Acknowledgement of these standards was present during the participants' interviews mostly within the subtheme of *Expectations.* Standard 1 of the PSELs detailed the requirements of the leader to "develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values" (NSPRA, 2016, p. 9). The communication directors discussed the large amount of time they spent promoting alignment of the district vision and initiatives. Responses formed the subtheme of Messaging aligning with Standard 1 of the PSELs. Also, the concept of promotion within each of NSPRA's standards was evident in the various commentary from the participants in the Information subtheme as they discussed

the ways in which they publicize their district's events, students, news, and initiatives. The Relationship subtheme within *Expectations* captured Standard 8 of the PSELs of promoting engagement of communal resources and networking within the community to promote student well-being. The participants viewed building these connections with the various stakeholders as crucial to their success in the public schools.

Furthermore, NSPRAs criteria for school public relations programs was also evidenced within the *Expectations* theme. The subtheme of Varied Communications developed from the participants' commentaries about the importance of using multiple methods of information dissemination and a variety of communication channels to promote the district. NSPRAs criteria specifically suggested school public relations professionals engage in multiple methods of communication with all stakeholders. The different audiences received information from a vast array of sources and the communication directors realized their responsibility to provide information in as many formats and channels as resources would allow.

Public relations practitioners' code of ethics in public schools. In addition to standards provided for public relations practitioners, various codes of ethics were also reviewed. The Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) adopted NSPRA's Code of Ethics in 1981 (TSPRA, 2016) and participants were aware of the ethics code and noted the need to adhere to ethical behavior in their practices. Participants discussed the value of providing truthful and accurate correspondences when providing information to the public. These responses resonated with TSPRA's ethical recommendation to the professional to be guided constantly by the pursuit of public interest through truth, accuracy, good taste, and fairness. Participants' responses developed into the subtheme

of Information within the theme of *Expectations.* In addition, the ethical practice supported by TSPRA included "giving primary loyalty to the employing organization . . . giving advisory council in accordance with sound public relations ideas (TSPRA, 2016, para. 2). The school public relations professionals in my study repeatedly discussed the need to put aside their own opinions and represent the opinions of the district. They viewed their position of one as confidant to the superintendent and advisor of public opinion when decisions needed to be made. Also, the various codes of ethics discussed the confidentiality required of a public relations professional and every participant in the study acknowledged the importance of such conduct.

Social media and public relations. In the 21st century, social media's presence is at the forefront of communications. The immediacy of information and the wide-spread availability of information to numerous audiences is accepted by public school communication directors as a mitigating factor in all they do each and every day. The literature I reviewed supported many of the responses gleaned from the interviews held with the participants.

Public schools. Public school districts have begun embracing social media in their communication plans and building social media identities has become an expectation of the leadership team. O'Reilly and Matt (2013) discovered in their study of superintendents that district leaders recognized social media dialogues affected public opinion about their districts. Superintendents realized the importance of appointing personnel to managing these online relationships. Subsequently, participants in my study acknowledged repeatedly the amount of time they spent utilizing various social media platforms and the expectations of their superintendents to actively engage with the

various publics using this media. In addition, my research corroborated the investigation of Cox and McLeod (2014) who determined there was an expectation of a social media presence to complement the traditional methods of communication such as newsletters and e-mail blasts. All of my participants, no matter the size of the district or the department, had a social media presence for their school and echoed the sentiments of research conducted by Carpenter et al. (2014).

Social media platforms. Though once not considered an opportunity to be explored by public schools, engagement in social media platforms are now the expectation. Cho et al. (2014) determined authentic and trusting relationships were built between organizations and their audiences when two-way, symmetrical communication was involved. The communication directors in my study discussed the changing expectations of their job roles when it came to their district's social media presence. Social media tasks were discussed within *Responsibilities, Challenges,* and *Expectations.* Facebook and Twitter were two of the social media sites most listed by the participants as audiences that were growing and engaged in a two-way communication with the district.

Evaluation and perceived effectiveness. Various studies in my literature review assessed the value perceived by the organizations from social media interaction. Did the benefits outweigh the costs in terms of personnel and finances? Curtis et al. (2010) concluded social media activity would continue to grow as organizations became more mindful of the influence of social media activity. The communication directors in my study varied on the amount of time and effort put into social media activity, but all of the districts had various social media accounts. No correlation could be drawn from the size of the district or department to the level of social media activity engaged by the district.

The expectations of the district leaders and the skill sets and interests of the directors and their teams seemed to be the factor that increased activity.

However, there were challenges and hurdles expressed by the communication directors in my study in regards to social media activity. The lack of control of the information associated with the district and the exorbitant amount of time that could be spent disseminating information, correcting false information, and answering to a 24/7 audience was a challenging aspect of social media in public school communication programs. These responses from the participants aligned with research completed by DiStaso et al. in 2011. The researchers determined a prominent concern of public relations professionals was the lack of control a social media presence could create for an organization. However, school district perceptions about social media have changed. Participants maintained schools should be involved in social media relationships, and multiple modes and methods of social media activity should be supported. Expectations for a social media presence cultivated by the school district's communication director were written into their job descriptions and performance evaluations.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Conceptual Framework

Grunig's (1992) excellence theory served as the conceptual framework for my study. Though not specific to only public education communication practices, the 15-year study of literature incorporated the best practices in communication management and produced a general theory of successful public relations. The theory provided a framework for how public relations assisted the goal attainment of an organization. In relation to my study, themes and sentiments about public relations emerged from the participants' interviews. Connections to Grunig's five principles of how public relations

roles and functions should be organized and executed to realize public relations' full potential to an organization were discovered.

Strategic management. According to Grunig's (1992) excellence theory, strategically developed programs that established relationships among all stakeholders were essential to achieving tasks and managing conflict. Participants in my research study often expressed this same importance in the building of relationships with the internal and external publics of a school community. These relationships were the foundations that allowed for collaboration of ideas, progression towards both parties' goals, and effective crisis management. In addition, Grunig's (1992) theory outlined the importance of positioning the public relations professional within upper-level management's organizational structure. All of the participants in my study were included within the superintendent's cabinet. Each member stressed the importance of having a direct line of report to the superintendent and a close, trusting relationship with their superintendent and the other high-ranking officials in the cabinet. Carrying out their responsibilities and meeting the expectations of the various stakeholders required their position to be included in the cabinet.

Individual public relations departments. A second principle for successful public relations professionals in Grunig's (1992) excellence theory was the independent positioning of the communication functions within a separate department. Adding additional tasks that incorporated public relations goals to an existing department such as sales or human resources was viewed as devaluing the worth of public relations to an organization. The communication directors in the study concurred with this sentiment. Each person belonged to an individualized public relations department, even if it was

only a department of one. Time and effort was spent by the school communication directors integrating the goals of the district within many modes of communication that were directed to a variety of audiences.

Symmetrical internal communication. A third principle of Grunig's (1992) excellence theory outlined a decentralized structure of authority that allowed for participation and expression of ideas of all stakeholders. In addition, the idea of social responsibility was evidenced in the theory. For the study's participants, decentralizing authority was not a main theme that emerged. In fact, an opposite response was given repeatedly about the importance of reporting with one voice and vocalizing the ideas and thoughts of the district's leadership or superintendent through multiple medias. All of the participants mentioned the need to set aside personal biases or opinions to write and report with leadership's values and views in mind. Social responsibility was communicated by the participants in their comments about trustworthiness, transparency, and truthfulness.

Diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender. Grunig's (1992) excellence theory espoused the need for diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender in public relations to best attain an organization's goals. Although the participants' interviews revealed the significance of reporting to different audiences utilizing multiple modes of communication channels, no mention was given about a need for diversity in race, ethnicity, or gender. However, specific questions about the need for diversity were not posed, so the participants very well might have agreed with Grunig if asked the direct question about the benefits of diversity within the department.

Excellence embodied in all facets of the organization. All of the study's participants who currently served in the role of public school communication director mentioned some component in their job of performing to the high expectations of their stakeholders. All mentioned the importance of timely, truthful reporting and covering stories and communicating information that was needed and expected by the different audiences. Grunig's (1992) excellence theory detailed an organization's commitment to excellence in all facets, especially in moral and ethical considerations. The public school communication directors echoed these ideas; truth and transparency was continually mentioned in their answers to the various questions about the expectations and responsibilities of their roles.

Recommendations for Practitioners

Based on my research, recommendations can be made to assist communication directors in Texas public school districts. First, superintendents should include the position of communication director within the leadership cabinet with a direct line of report to the superintendent. In addition, superintendents should possess complete trust and confidence to confide the whole truths of situations and circumstances to their communication directors so the public relations professionals can perform their duties. Only knowing half of the story hampers the effectiveness of the communication director's ability to convey a proper message to the various stakeholders. A circle of truth and honesty within the relationship of the superintendent and public relations professional should exist. Furthermore, the Board of Trustees should understand the value of the communications role within the district and provide support with resources that maximizes the efficiency of the department. It is the communication director's

responsibility to furnish the Board of Trustees and the superintendent with enough data to support the presence of a district communications department.

Furthermore, my research discovered the importance of building relationships within the walls of the school and outside in the community. Communication specialists should recognize the importance of each and every person who crosses their paths. Every meeting and conversation is a chance to network, promote, and advertise for the district. Whether they are actually on duty or not, school communication professionals should never miss an opportunity to tell someone about the amazing things that are happening in their districts and try to make connections with community resources that can be tapped into for student achievement and growth. The value of a community that contains a majority of school district supporters can never be overlooked. This resource becomes an extension of the school district's public relations department and can facilitate the district's goals and mission on a much larger scale. Allocating time to build this community of supporters should be a priority of the communication specialist.

Another recommendation for the school communication director is to gather multiple mentors from various districts and businesses. Seasoned veterans who have experienced a variety of school crisis situations, volatile board meetings, or bond referendums are a huge asset to becoming more adept in the role. Stepping outside of the education industry and acquiring mentors from other areas of business can also aide the school public relations professional in garnering different vantage points for various circumstances.

A final recommendation for school communication specialist is to continue to grow in their area of expertise and attend professional development as often as possible.

The landscape of issues surrounding public education changes constantly and it is imperative that the public relations person be well versed in legislative issues, social issues, and current trends. Membership in organizations like the Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) assists school communication specialists in trainings, seminars, and conferences. TSPRA provides resources to its members to assist in the many types of communique delivered by public relations professionals.

Recommendations for Future Research

In this study, I explored the experiences of public school communication directors. Six current Texas public school communication directors were interviewed. Three males and three females from various ethnicities were selected for my study. All worked in school districts in Region 4 and Region 6 in Texas and held membership in the Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA). Opportunities exist for future research.

First, a future study could be conducted with an increased sample size and include focus groups as part of the data collection. Additional themes might evolve from the interview process and allow for a deeper understanding of the public school communication director experience. Increased discussion among participants might help to flesh out the themes and subthemes, thereby adding more depth to the data.

In addition, though no connections or observations could be made to the different experiences, roles, and challenges of communication directors based on gender, a future study could be conducted to explore if differences do exist. Alteration in the interview protocol would allow for exploration into the roles and challenges of the public relations

professional and the impact gender makes on the position. Further research might highlight these gender differences.

Third, a delimitation of my study was the participants work within a public independent school district. A future study including public relations professionals employed by private or charter schools might yield different findings. Examining these differences would yield an important contribution to the discussions held about public versus private schools as parents and students continue to investigate their school choice options.

Another recommendation for future research arose from the findings from the cross-case analysis. An investigation into the reasons why professionals choose careers in school public relations and their job satisfaction level might provide useful information about the position. Even though the participants worked long hours, acknowledged limited resources, and noted an inadequate number of people were allocated to the communication department, all participants had a positive view of their position. All of the participants said they would choose school public relations as a profession again if they had to do it over.

Finally, if I could do this study again, I would examine the differences between school communication directors with an academic professional background and communication directors with a business or journalism professional background. All of my study's participants held some type of postsecondary journalism or communication degree and began their careers in the business sector. However, school communication directors do originate from classroom positions or campus administration positions and a study examining the different experiences of the school communication directors who

progressed from different professional paths might yield additional findings to support the profession.

Conclusion

Public relations professionals have become part of the administrative framework of today's public schools in the 21st century. As the expectations of stakeholders increase to require immediate, up-to-date, and accurate information, school superintendents recognize the importance of employing the services of communication specialists to assist in meeting those demands (Kowalski, 2011; Moore et al., 2016). However, a lack of current research specifically about school public relations as a profession remains. My study was an attempt to examine the experiences of current Texas public school communication directors. Findings from my study provided recommendations on how to improve practices and better support the school public relations professional.

As discovered in the research literature, social media continues to present opportunities and challenges for the school communication specialist. The immediacy of news delivery has allowed for increased efficiency in promotion of activities and events and crisis management. However, this exact same immediacy of communication has created additional challenges for the public relations professional to make sure accurate, appropriate information is provided. The ever-changing landscape of social media channels and methods of information delivery presents challenges to the communication specialists as they must always be knowledgeable of the needs of their audiences and adjust their modes of delivery to keep up with the continual evolution of social media use.

In conclusion, the significance of relationship building and mentorships was emphasized throughout all of the interviews with the study's participants. Whether the conversation topics focused on preparation, responsibilities, expectations, challenges, or recommendations for the position, the importance of the connections made with others was a common thread running throughout all of the interviews. Relationship building with school personnel, the community, and mentors inside and outside of the public relations field was seen as essential to the success of the public school communications professional.

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APPENDIX A

Communication Director Qualitative Study Interview Questions

Think about your position as a communication director.

1. Tell me about your career path to the communication director's position.

   *How did you prepare for this position?

   *What trainings or experiences prepared you best?

2. Describe a typical day in your life as a communication director?

   *What regular activities are you involved in on weekly basis?

   * What regular activities are you involved in on a monthly basis?

   * What's your favorite role you fill in your district? Least favorite?

3. Let's talk about the expectations for your position from district stakeholders.

   *What are your superintendent's expectations of you?

   *What are your principals' expectations of you?

   *What are your Board of Trustee's expectations of you?

   *What other relationships stand out as important to your position?

4. What are some of your biggest challenges in your position as communication director?

   *What keeps you up at night about your job?

   *If there was more time in a workday, what would you want to do more of or how would you spend it?

5. What recommendations would you share with school districts for supporting communication directors?

   *What advice might you share with a new communication director?

*How could your position be more effective to meet district goals?

APPENDIX B

Communication/Public Relations Director Questionnaire

Following are a few questions to complete at the end of your interview.

Total number of years in public relations/communications (counting this year):
_____ years

1. **Total number of years in public school communications (counting this year):**
   _____ years

2. **Total number of years you have served as public school communication director (counting this year)**
   _____ years

3. **List the positions held prior to your present position:**

   _____

4. **Number of students enrolled in your district:**
   _____

5. **Number of campuses in your district:**

   _____

6. **How would you describe your general morale as it relates to your work?**
   - ❍ Very Positive
   - ❍ Somewhat positive
   - ❍ Neither positive nor negative
   - ❍ Somewhat negative
   - ❍ Very negative

7. **If you could turn back time, you would want to become a communication director again.**
   - ❍ Strongly agree
   - ❍ Somewhat agree
   - ❍ Neither agree nor disagree
   - ❍ Somewhat disagree
   - ❍ Strongly disagree

8. **Indicate the number of personnel in your department, including yourself:**
   (1 = one full time unit)
   _____ units

9. **Regarding other departmental personnel, how frequently is this number adequate for your district's needs?**
   - ❍ Almost always
   - ❍ Most of the time
   - ❍ Some of the time
   - ❍ Not much of the time
   - ❍ Rarely

10. **Approximately, how many hours do you work each week (counting evenings & weekends)?**

    _____ hours/wk

11. **What is the highest degree you have earned?**
    - ❍ Bachelor's
    - ❍ Master's
    - ❍ Post Master's coursework
    - ❍ Doctorate: PhD or EdD

12. **Your current age: _____**

13. **Your gender:**
    - ❍ Male
    - ❍ Female

14. **Your ethnicity**
    - ❍ Asian
    - ❍ Black
    - ❍ Hispanic
    - ❍ Native American
    - ❍ Pacific Islander
    - ❍ White/Not of Hispanic origin
    - ❍ Other

15. **Post-interview, what other information might you want to share about the challenges of being a public school communication director?**

APPENDIX C

Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs 903 Bowers Blvd, Huntsville, TX 77341-2448
Phone: 936.294.4875
Fax: 936.294.3622
irb@shsu.edu
www.shsu.edu/~rgs_www/irb/

DATE: August 4, 2016
TO: Sonja Lopez [Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Julie Combs]
FROM: Sam Houston State University (SHSU) IRB
PROJECT TITLE: Experiences of Texas Public School Communication Directors in the 21st Century: A Phenomenological Study [T/D]
PROTOCOL #: 2016-07-30604 SUBMISSION TYPE:
INITIAL REVIEW ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: August 4, 2016
EXPIRATION DATE: August 4, 2017
REVIEW TYPE: EXPEDITED REVIEW CATEGORIES: 7

Thank you for your submission of your Initial Review for this project. The Sam Houston State University (SHSU) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure which are found on the Application Page to the SHSU IRB website.
All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All Department of Health and Human Services and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of August 4, 2017. When you have completed the project, a Final Report must be submitted to ORSP in order to close the project file.
Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.
If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 936-294-4875 or irb@shsu.edu. Please include your project title and protocol number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,

Donna Desforges
IRB Chair, PHSC
PHSC-IRB

VITA

SONJA A. LOPEZ

EDUCATION

University of Houston, Houston, TX	Master of Education (M.Ed.), Curriculum & Instruction
University of Houston, Houston, TX	Bachelor of Science (B.S.), Hotel & Restaurant Management (Major), Psychology (Minor)

PROFESSIONAL LICENSES

Texas Superintendent Certification (EC-12)
Texas Principal Certification (EC-12)
Texas Teaching Certification (English 6-12)
Texas Special Education Certification (EC-12)

ACADEMIC POSITIONS

2016-present	Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources & Communications Montgomery ISD, Montgomery, Texas
2012-2016	Executive Director of Human Resources & Communications, Montgomery ISD, Montgomery, Texas
2008-2012	Principal, Madeley Ranch Elementary, Montgomery ISD, Montgomery, Texas
2004- 2009	Assistant Principal, Montgomery Junior High School, Montgomery ISD, Montgomery, Texas
2008 (summer)	Principal, Secondary Summer School, Montgomery ISD, Montgomery, TX
1999-2004	Teacher, English & Yearbook Advisor, Conroe ISD, Conroe, Texas

PUBLICATIONS

1. Lopez, S. A., & Slate, J. R. (2015). Differences in beginning teacher percentages for Texas elementary schools as a function of Achievement Distinctions. *International Journal of Psychology Research, 9*(4), 1-12.

2. Craft, H. M., Malveaux, R., Lopez, S. A., & Combs, J. P. (2016). The acclimation of new assistant principals. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, *1*(2), 9-18. Retrieved from http://www.jsard.org/

PRESENTATIONS AT PROFESSIONAL MEETINGS

1. Lopez, S. A. (2016, January). *Differences in beginning teacher percentages for Texas elementary schools as a function of Achievement Distinctions.* Poster presented at the annual Hawaii International Conference on Education, Honolulu, HI.

2. Craft, H. M., Malveaux, R., Lopez, S. A., Combs, J. P. (2016, February). *The acclimation of new assistant principals.* Paper presented at the annual conference of the Southwest Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

3. Lopez, S. A, Malveaux, R., & Craft, H. M. (2016, April). *Qualitative research on the roles of assistant school principals*. Invited presentation for Doctoral Course in Qualitative Research Methods, Sam Houston State University-Woodlands Center.

SERVICE

Local/Community Service (Selected)

Montgomery Chamber of Commerce: Board Member, Montgomery, TX
Coat of Many Color Ministries: Board Member, Montgomery, TX
Schoolwide Enrichment Model E-Track: Presenter: Montgomery ISD, Montgomery, TX
Montgomery Leadership Institute: Presenter: Montgomery ISD, Montgomery, TX
Student Health Advisory Council: Co-Chair, Montgomery ISD, Montgomery, TX
New Teacher Academy: Presenter, Montgomery ISD, Montgomery, TX

HONORS

Valedictorian, Summa Cum Laude Graduate, University of Houston, 1990
Dean's List-University of Houston, 1988-1990

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

Houston School Public Relations Association (HSPRA)
Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)
Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA)
Texas Association of School Boards (TASB)
Texas Association of School Personnel Administrators (TASPA)
Texas Association of Secondary School Principals (TASSP)
Texas Elementary School Principal Association (TESPA)
Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA)